THE NEW WEIRD

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EDITED BY ANN & JEFF VANDERMEER

THE NEW WEIRD

The New Weird

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The New Weird: "It's Alive?"

JEFF VANDERMEER

ORIGINS

THE "NEW WEIRD" EXISTED long before 2003, when M. John Harrison started a message board thread with the words: "The New Weird. Who does it? What is it? Is it even anything?" For this reason, and this reason only, it continues to exist now, even after a number of critics, reviewers, and writers have distanced themselves from the term.

By 2003, readers and writers had become aware of a change in perception and a change in approach within genre. Crystallized by the popularity of China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, this change had to do with finally acknowledging a shift in *The Weird*.

Weird fiction – typified by magazines like *Weird Tales* and writers like H. P. Lovecraft or Clark Ashton Smith back in the glory days of the pulps – eventually morphed into modern-day traditional Horror. "Weird" refers to the sometimes supernatural or fantastical element of unease in many of these stories – an element that could take a blunt, literal form or more subtle and symbolic form and which was, as in the best of Lovecraft's work, combined with a visionary sensibility. These types of stories also often rose above their pulp or self-taught origins through the strength of the writer's imagination. (There are definite parallels to be drawn between certain kinds of pulp fiction and so-called "Outsider Art.")

Two impulses or influences distinguish the New Weird from the "Old" Weird, and make the term more concrete than terms like "slipstream" and "interstitial," which have no distinct lineage. The New

Wave of the 1960s was the first stimulus leading to the New Weird. Featuring authors such as M. John Harrison, Michael Moorcock, and J. G. Ballard, the New Wave deliriously mixed genres, high and low art, and engaged in formal experimentation, often typified by a distinctly political point of view. New Wave writers also often blurred the line between science fiction and fantasy, writing a kind of updated "scifantasy," first popularized by Jack Vance in his *Dying Earth* novels. This movement (backed by two of its own influences, Mervyn Peake and the Decadents of the late 1800s) provided what might be thought of as the brain of New Weird.

The second stimulus came from the unsettling grotesquery of such seminal 1980s work as Clive Barker's *Books of Blood*. In this kind of fiction, body transformations and dislocations create a visceral, contemporary take on the kind of visionary horror best exemplified by the work of Lovecraft – while moving past Lovecraft's coyness in recounting events in which the monster or horror can never fully be revealed or explained. In many of Barker's best tales, the starting point is the acceptance of a monster or a transformation and the story is what comes after. Transgressive horror, then, repurposed to focus on the monsters and grotesquery but not the "scare," forms the beating heart of the New Weird.

In a sense, the simultaneous understanding of and rejection of Old Weird, hardwired to the stimuli of the New Wave and New Horror, gave many of the writers identified as New Weird the signs and symbols needed to both forge ahead into the unknown and create their own unique re-combinations of familiar elements.

THE SHIFT

Nameless for a time, a type of New Weird or proto–New Weird entered the literary world in the gap between the end of the miniature horror renaissance engendered by Barker and his peers and the publication of *Perdido Street Station* in 2000.

In the 1990s, "New Weird" began to manifest itself in the form of cult writers like Jeffrey Thomas and his cross-genre urban Punktown stories. It continued to find a voice in the work of Thomas Ligotti, who straddled

a space between the traditional and the avant garde. It coalesced in the David Lynchean approach of Michael Cisco to Eastern European mysticism in works like *The Divinity Student*. It entered real-world settings through unsettling novels by Kathe Koja, such as *The Cipher* and *Skin*, with their horrific interrogations of the body and mind. It entered into disturbing dialogue about sex and gender in Richard Calder's novels, with their mix of phantasmagoria and pseudo-cyberpunk. It could also be found in Jeffrey Ford's Well-Built City trilogy, my own Ambergris stories (*Dradin, In Love*, etc.), and the early short work of K. J. Bishop and Alastair Reynolds, among others.

Magazines like Andy Cox's *The Third Alternative*, my wife Ann's *The Silver Web*, and, to a lesser extent, David Pringle's *Interzone* and Chris Reed/Manda Thomson's *Back Brain Recluse* – along with anthologies like my *Leviathan* series – provided support for this kind of work, which generally did not interest commercial publishers. Ironically, despite most New Weird fiction of the 1990s being skewed heavily toward the grotesque end of the New Wave/New Horror spectrum, many horror publications and reviewers dismissed the more confrontational or surreal examples of the form. It represented a definite threat to the Lovecraft clones and *Twilight Zone* döppelgangers that dominated the horror field by the mid-1990s.

FLASH POINT

The publication of Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* in 2000 represented what might be termed the first commercially acceptable version of the New Weird, one that both coarsened and broadened the New Weird approach through techniques more common to writers like Charles Dickens, while adding a progressive political slant. Miéville also displayed a fascination with permutations of the body, much like Barker, and incorporated, albeit in a more direct way, ideas like odd plagues (M. John Harrison) and something akin to a Multiverse (Michael Moorcock).

Miéville's fiction wasn't inherently superior to what had come before, but it was *epic*, and it wedded a "surrender to the weird" – literally, the writer's surrender to the material, without ironic distance –

to rough-hewn but effective plots featuring earnest, proactive characters. This approach made *Perdido Street Station* much more accessible to readers than such formative influences on Miéville as Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast novels or M. John Harrison's Viriconium cycle.

The truth of this accessibility also resides at the sentence and paragraph level, which in Miéville's case house brilliant, often startling images and situations, but do not always display the same control as those past masters.[1] Yet, by using broader brushstrokes, Miéville created much more space for his readers, a trade-off that helped create his success. (Ultimately, Miéville would also serve as an entry point to work that was more ambitious on the paragraph level. In a neat time traveling trick, one of his own touchstones, M. John Harrison, would benefit greatly from that success.)

Quite simply, Miéville had created just the right balance between pulp writing, visionary, surreal images, and literary influences to attract a wider audience – and serve as the lightning rod for what would become known as New Weird.

THE DEBATE

But Miéville wasn't alone. By the time Harrison posited his question "What is New Weird?" it had become clear that a number of other writers had developed at the same time as Miéville, using similar stimuli. My *City of Saints & Madmen*, K. J. Bishop's *The Etched City,* and Paul Di Filippo's *A Year in the Linear City,* among others, appeared in the period from 2001 to 2003, with Steph Swainston's *The Year of Our War* published in 2004. It seemed that something had Risen Spontaneous – even though in almost every case, the work itself had been written in the 1990s and either needed time to gestate or had been rejected by publishers – and thus there was a need to explain or name the beast.

The resulting conversation on the *Third Alternative* public message boards consisted of many thousands of words, used in the struggle to name, define, analyze, spin, explore, and quantify the term "New Weird." The debate involved more than fifty writers, reviewers, and critics, all with their own questions, agendas, and concerns.

1 By Miéville's own admission, and not meant as a pejorative here.

By the end of the discussion, part of which is reprinted in this anthology, it wasn't clear if New Weird as a term existed or not. However, over the next few years, with varying levels of enthusiasm, Miéville (and various acolytes and followers) promulgated versions of the term, emphasizing the "surrender to the weird," but also a very specific political component. Miéville thought of New Weird as "post-Seattle" fiction, referring to the effects of globalization and grassroots efforts to undermine institutions like the World Bank.[2] This use of the term "New Weird" was in keeping with Miéville's idealism and Marxist leanings in the world outside of fiction, but, in my opinion, preternaturally narrowed the parameters of the term. This brand of New Weird seemed far too limiting, unlike the type envisioned by Steph Swainston in the original message board discussion; her New Weird seemed almost like a form of literary Deism, a primal and epiphanal experience.

The passion behind Miéville's efforts made sure that the term would live on – even after he began to disown it, claiming it had become a marketing category and was therefore of no further interest to him. Despite Miéville's lack of interest, by 2005 the term "New Weird" was being used with some regularity by readers, writers, and critics.

That the term, as explored primarily by M. John Harrison and Steph Swainston, and then taken up by Miéville, has since been rejected or severely questioned not only by the initial Triumvirate but by several others speaks to the fact that most New Weird writers, like most New Wave writers, are various in their approaches over time. They are not repeating themselves for the most part.[3] Cross-pollination – of genres, of boundaries – occurs as part of an effort to avoid easy classification – not for its own sake, or even consciously in most cases, but in an attempt to allow readers and writers to enter into a dialogue that is genuine, unique, and not based on received ideas or terms.

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2 Miéville attempted to place this political element within a complex, multifaceted context, but the reality of how ideas are transmitted meant that this complexity was stripped away as the thought spread and was re-transmitted, each time more constraining and less interesting.

3 The constant flux-and-flow of support and lack of support for New Weird in the same individuals would be taken as "waffling" in a politician. In a writer, it is part of the necessary testing and re-testing connected to one's writing, as well as part of the need to continually be open to and curious about the world.

I myself reacted violently to the idea of New Weird in 2003 – in part because it seemed that some writers wanted to claim it, falsely, as a uniquely English phenomenon; in part because I continue to champion artistic discussion and publication of "genre" and "literary" work within one context and continuum; and in part because it did seem limiting inasmuch as the term was most useful applied to specific works rather than specific writers (almost impossible to "enforce," given how labeling works).

In retrospect, however, my rejection of the term seems premature – because as used in the message board discussion, "New Weird" was just a term on which to hang an exploration and investigation of what looked like a sudden explosion of associated texts. While much of the discussion may have been surface, much of it was also incisive, rich, and deep. With less concern about holding onto "territory" and control, from everyone, those discussions might have led to something more substantive.

EFFECTS IN THE "REAL" WORLD

The other reality about the term "New Weird" has little to do with either moments or movements and more to do with the marketplace: Miéville's success, through his own efforts and those of his followers, became linked to the term New Weird. A practical result of this affiliation is that it became easier for this kind of fiction to find significant publication. It wasn't just "find me the next Miéville" – firstly impossible and secondly corrosive – but "find me more New Weird fiction." As an editor at a large North American publishing house told me two years ago, "New Weird" has been a "useful shorthand" not only when justifying acquiring a particular novel, but also when marketing departments talk to booksellers.[4] Confusion about the specifics of the term created a larger protective umbrella for writers from a publishing standpoint. Many books far stranger than Miéville's have been prominently published as a result.

4 By now, this effect may have begun to fade, like all marketing trends, but the writers blessed by its effects now have careers autonomous from the original umbilical cord.

I know that without New Weird, it would have been harder for me to find publication by commercial and foreign language publishers. This is probably doubly true for writers like K. J. Bishop, who had not already had books out by 2001. In a trickle-down effect, I also believe this atmosphere has helped decidedly non–New Weird writers like Hal Duncan, whose own brand of weirdness is much more palatable in the wake of the "New Weird explosion."[5]

The other truth is that even though heroic fantasy and other forms of genre fiction still sell much better than most New Weird books, New Weird writers partially dominated the critical and awards landscape for almost half a decade.[6]

In a similar way, New Weird has become shorthand for readers, who don't care about the vagaries of taxonomy so much as "I know it when I read it." For this reason, writers such as Kelly Link, Justina Robson, and Charles Stross have all been, at one time or another, identified as New Weird. These reader associations occur because when encountering something unique most of us grab the label that seems the closest match so we can easily describe our enthusiasm to others. (The result of both carefree readers and some careless academics has been to make it seem as if New Weird is as indefinable and slippery a term as "interstitial.")

The effect of New Weird outside of England, North America, and Australia has been various but often dynamic. New Weird has, in some countries, already mutated and adapted as an ever-shifting "moment" – as well as a potent label for publishers. In some places "New Weird" has become uniquely independent of what anyone associated with the original discussion in 2003 now thinks of the term and its usefulness. For example, in Finland you can say without equivocation that Kelly Link *is* New Weird.

In addition, as alluded to earlier in this introduction, many of the

5 Inasmuch as there is a "Godfather" or "protective angel" of New Weird, that person would be Peter Lavery, editor at Pan Macmillan, who took a chance on Miéville, Bishop, Duncan, me, and several other "strange" writers.

6 At the same time, New Weird has largely failed to penetrate the awareness of the literary mainstream, probably because of its secondary-world nature, which is almost always a barrier to breaking out of the genre "ghetto."

writers associated with New Weird and collected in this volume are already transforming into something else entirely, while new writers like Alistair Rennie (whose story is original to this anthology), have assimilated the New Weird influence, combined it with yet other stimuli, and created their own wonderfully bizarre and transgressive recombination.

This speaks to the nature of art: as soon as something becomes popular or familiar, the true revolution moves elsewhere. Sometimes the writers involved in the original radicalism move on, too, and sometimes they allow themselves to be left behind.

A WORKING DEFINITION OF NEW WEIRD

Following the aftermath of all of this discussion, research, and reading, the opportunity to create a working definition of twenty-first-century New Weird now presents itself:

> New Weird is a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy. New Weird has a visceral, in-the-moment quality that often uses elements of surreal or transgressive horror for its tone, style, and effects – in combination with the stimulus of influence from New Wave writers or their proxies (including also such forebears as Mervyn Peake and the French/English Decadents). New Weird fictions are acutely aware of the modern world, even if in disguise, but not always overtly political. As part of this awareness of the modern world, New Weird relies for its visionary power on a "surrender to the weird" that isn't, for example, hermetically sealed in a haunted house on the moors or in a cave in Antarctica. The "surrender" (or "belief") of the writer can take many forms, some of them even involving the use of postmodern techniques that do not undermine the surface reality of the text.

This definition presents two significant ways in which the New Weird can be distinguished from Slipstream or Interstitial fiction. First, while Slipstream and Interstitial fiction often claim New Wave influence, they rarely if ever cite a Horror influence, with its particular emphasis on the intense use of grotesquery focused around transformation, decay, or mutilation of the human body. Second, postmodern techniques that undermine the surface reality of the text (or point out its artificiality) are not part of the New Weird aesthetic, but they are part of the Slipstream and Interstitial toolbox.

THIS ANTHOLOGY

We hope that this anthology will provide a rough guide to the moment or movement known as "New Weird" – acknowledging that the pivotal "moment" is behind us, but that this moment had already lasted much longer than generally believed, had definite precursors, and continues to spread an Effect, even as it dissipates or becomes something else. (And who knows? Another pivotal "moment" may be ahead of us.)

In this anthology, you will find a "Stimuli" section that includes both New Wave and New Horror examples, along with work by fence-straddlers like Simon Ings and Thomas Ligotti. You will also find an "Evidence" section that pulls New Weird examples from pulp and the literary mainstream, from dark fantasy and from foreign language sources. To highlight just a few of these selections, China Miéville's "Jack," stripped-down and gracefully gruff and ironic, revisits the New Crobuzon of his novels, in much the same way as Jeffrey Ford revisits a proto-Well-Built City setting in "At Reparata." Other highlights include the Brian Evenson's Beckett-Kafka-esque take on Gormenghast in "Watson's Boy," the unabashed decadence of K. J. Bishop's "The Art of Dying," and the frenzied post–New Weird grotesquery of Alistair Rennie's "The Gutter Meets the Light That Never Shines," a story original to this anthology that showcases the effect of combining New Wave and New Horror elements with pop culture and comics influences.

The "Symposium" section preserves the beginning of the message board thread about New Weird begun by M. John Harrison in 2003,[7]

7 The catalyst probably being comments by Steph Swainston.

along with Michael Cisco's essay from the year after, and three pieces written specially for this volume: scholar and writer Darja Malcolm-Clarke's "Tracking Phantoms," an exploration of her changing views on New Weird; writer K. J. Bishop's "Whose Words You Wear," her thoughts on the effects of labeling; and "European Editor Perspectives on the New Weird," which charts the influence and permutations of the term across several different countries. Finally, in "Laboratory" we asked several writers existing outside of or on the fringe of New Weird[8] to create a round-robin story that showcases, in fictional form, their own manifestation of the term. This section was never meant to be a complete story – more a series of vignettes – but the results are cohesive and fascinating.

Ann and I still have reservations about the term New Weird, but in our readings, research, and conversations, we have come to believe the term has a core validity. The proof is that it has taken on an artistic and commercial life beyond that intended by those individuals who, in their inquisitiveness about a "moment," unintentionally created a movement. It is still mutating *forward* through the work of a new generation of writers, as well.

Finally, anyone who reads the initial New Weird discussions will find that the term arose from a sense of curiosity, of play, of (sometimes bloody-minded) mischievousness, and from a love for fiction. We offer up this anthology in the spirit of the best of that original discussion.

New Weird is dead. Long live the Next Weird.

8 Felix Gilman being an exception – a new writer who unabashedly points to New Weird influence.

THE NEW WEIRD

STIMULI

The Luck in the Head

M. JOHN HARRISON

UROCONIUM, Ardwick Crome said, was for all its beauty an indifferent city. Its people loved the arena; they were burning or quartering somebody every night for political or religious crimes. They hadn't much time for anything else. From where he lived, at the top of a tenement on the outskirts of Montrouge, you could often see the fireworks in the dark, or hear the shouts on the wind.

He had two rooms. In one of them was an iron-framed bed with a few blankets on it, pushed up against a washstand he rarely used. Generally he ate his meals cold, though he had once tried to cook an egg by lighting a newspaper under it. He had a chair, and a tall white ewer with a picture of the courtyard of an inn on it. The other room, a small north-light studio once occupied – so tradition in the Artists' Quarter had it – by Kristodulos Fleece the painter, he kept shut. It had some of his books in it, also the clothes in which he had first come to Uroconium and which he had thought then were fashionable.

He was not a well-known poet, although he had his following.

Every morning he would write for perhaps two hours, first restricting himself to the bed by means of three broad leather straps which his father had given him and to which he fastened himself, at the ankles, the hips, and finally across his chest. The sense of unfair confinement or punishment induced by this, he found, helped him to think.

Sometimes he called out or struggled; often he lay quite inert and looked dumbly up at the ceiling. He had been born in those vast dull ploughlands which roll east from Soubridge into the Midland Levels

like a chocolate-coloured sea, and his most consistent work came from the attempt to retrieve and order the customs and events of his childhood there: the burial of the "Holly Man" on Plough Monday, the sound of the hard black lupin seeds popping and tapping against the window in August while his mother sang quietly in the kitchen the ancient carols of the *Oei'l Voirrey.* He remembered the meadows and reeds beside the Yser Canal, the fishes that moved within it. When his straps chafed, the old bridges were in front of him, made of warm red brick and curved protectively over their own image in the water!

Thus Crome lived in Uroconium, remembering, working, publishing. He sometimes spent an evening in the Bistro Californium or the Luitpold Café. Several of the Luitpold critics (notably Barzelletta Angst, who in *L'Espace Cromien* ignored entirely the conventional chronology – expressed in the idea of "recherche" – of Crome's long poem *Bream into Man)* tried to represent his work as a series of narrativeless images, glued together only by his artistic persona. Crome refuted them in a pamphlet. He was content.

Despite his sedentary habit he was a sound sleeper. But before it blows at night over the pointed roofs of Montrouge, the southwest wind must first pass between the abandoned towers of the Old City, as silent as burnt logs, full of birds, scraps of machinery, and broken-up philosophies: and Crome had hardly been there three years when he began to have a dream in which he was watching the ceremony called "the Luck in the Head."

For its proper performance this ceremony requires the construction on a seashore, between the low and high tide marks at the Eve of Assumption, of two fences or "hedges." These are made by weaving osiers – usually cut at first light on the same day – through split hawthorn uprights upon which the foliage has been left. The men of the town stand at one end of the corridor thus formed; the women, their thumbs tied together behind their backs, at the other. At a signal the men release between the hedges a lamb decorated with medallions, paper ribbons, and strips of rag. The women race after, catch it, and scramble to keep it from one another, the winner being the one who can seize the back of the animal's neck with her teeth. In Dunham Massey,

Lymm, and Iron Chine, the lamb is paraded for three days on a pole before being made into pies; and it is good luck to obtain the pie made from the head.

In his dream Crome found himself standing on some sand dunes, looking out over the wastes of marram grass at the osier fences and the tide. The women, with their small heads and long grey garments, stood breathing heavily like horses, or walked nervously in circles avoiding one another's eyes as they tested with surreptitious tugs the red cord which bound their thumbs. Crome could see no one there he knew. Somebody said, "A hundred eggs and a calf's tail," and laughed. Ribbons fluttered in the cold air: they had introduced the lamb. It stood quite still until the women, who had been lined up and settled down after a certain amount of jostling, rushed at it. Their shrieks rose up like those of herring gulls, and a fine rain came in from the sea.

"They're killing one another!" Crome heard himself say.

Without any warning one of them burst out of the mêlée with the lamb in her teeth. She ran up the dunes with a floundering, splay-footed gait and dropped it at his feet. He stared down at it.

"It's not mine," he said. But everyone else had walked away.

He woke up listening to the wind and staring at the washstand, got out of bed and walked round the room to quieten himself down. Fireworks, greenish and queasy with the hour of the night, lit up the air intermittently above the distant arena. Some of this illumination, entering through the skylight, fell as a pale wash on his thin arms and legs, fixing them in attitudes of despair.

If he went to sleep again he often found, in a second lobe or episode of the dream, that he had already accepted the dead lamb and was himself running with it, at a steady premeditated trot, down the landward side of the dunes towards the town. (This he recognised by its slate roofs as Lowick, a place he had once visited in childhood. In its streets some men made tiny by distance were banging on the doors with sticks, as they had done then. He remembered very clearly the piece of singed sheepskin they had been making people smell.) Empty ground stretched away on either side of him under a motionless sky; everything – the clumps of thistles, the frieze of small thorn trees deformed by the

wind, the sky itself – had a brownish cast, as if seen through an atmosphere of tars. He could hear the woman behind him to begin with, but soon he was left alone. In the end Lowick vanished too, though he began to run as quickly as he could, and left him in a mist or smoke through which a bright light struck, only to be diffused immediately.

By then the lamb had become something that produced a thick buzzing noise, a vibration which, percolating up the bones of his arm and into his shoulder, then into the right side of his neck and face where it reduced the muscles to water, made him feel nauseated, weak, and deeply afraid. Whatever it was he couldn't shake it off his hand.

Clearly – in that city and at that age of the world – it would have been safer for Crome to look inside himself for the source of this dream. Instead, after he had woken one day with the early light coming through the shutters like sour milk and a vague rheumatic ache in his neck, he went out into Uroconium to pursue it. He was sure he would recognise the woman if he saw her, or the lamb.

She was not in the Bistro Californium when he went there by way of the Via Varese, or in Mecklenburgh Square. He looked for her in Proton Alley, where the beggars gaze back at you emptily and the pavement artists offer to draw for you, in that curious mixture of powdered chalk and condensed milk they favour, pictures of the Lamia, without clothes or without skin, with fewer limbs or organs than normal, or more. They couldn't draw the woman he wanted. On the Unter-Main-Kai (it was eight in the morning and the naphtha flares had grown smoky and dim) a boy spun and tottered among the crowds from the arena, declaiming in a language no one knew. He bared his shaven skull, turned his bony face upwards, mouth open. Suddenly he drove a long thorn into his own neck: at this the women rushed up to him and thrust upon him cakes, cosmetic emeralds, coins. Crome studied their faces: nothing. In the Luitpold Café he found Ansel Verdigris and some others eating gooseberries steeped in gin.

"I'm sick," said Verdigris, clutching Crome's hand.

He spooned up a few more gooseberries and then, letting the spoon fall back into the dish with a clatter, rested his head on the tablecloth

beside it. From this position he was forced to stare up sideways at Crome and talk with one side of his mouth. The skin beneath his eyes had the shine of wet pipe clay; his coxcomb of reddish-yellow hair hung damp and awry; the electric light, falling oblique and bluish across his white triangular face, lent it an expression of astonishment.

"My brain's poisoned, Crome," he said. "Let's go up into the hills and run about in the snow."

He looked round with contempt at his friends, Gunter Verlac and the Baron de V—, who grinned sheepishly back.

"Look at them!" he said. "Crome, we're the only human beings here. Let's renew our purity! We'll dance on the lips of the icy gorges!"

"It's the wrong season for snow," said Crome.

"Well, then," Verdigris whispered, "let's go where the old machines leak and flicker, and you can hear the calls of the madmen from the asylum up at Wergs. Listen –"

"No!" said Crome. He wrenched his hand away.

"Listen, proctors are out after me from Cheminor to Mynned! Lend me some money, Crome, I'm sick of my crimes. Last night they shadowed me along the cinder paths among the poplar trees by the isolation hospital."

He laughed, and began to eat gooseberries as fast as he could.

"The dead remember only the streets, never the numbers of the houses!"

Verdigris lived with his mother, a woman of some means and education who called herself Madam "L," in Delpine Square. She was always as concerned about the state of his health as he was about hers. They lay ill with shallow fevers and deep cafards, in rooms that joined, so that they could buoy one another up through the afternoons of insomnia. As soon as they felt recovered enough they would let themselves be taken from salon to salon by wheelchair, telling one another amusing little stories as they went. Once a month Verdigris would leave her and spend all night at the arena with some prostitute; fall unconscious in the Luitpold or the Californium; and wake up distraught a few hours later in his own bed. His greatest fear was that he would catch syphilis. Crome looked down at him.

"You've never been to Cheminor, Verdigris," he said. "Neither of us has."

Verdigris stared at the tablecloth. Suddenly he stuffed it into his mouth – his empty dish fell onto the floor where it rolled about for a moment, faster and faster, and was smashed – only to throw back his head and pull it out again, inch by inch, like a medium pulling out ectoplasm in Margery Fry Court.

"You won't be so pleased with yourself," he said, "when you've read this."

And he gave Crome a sheet of thick green paper, folded three times, on which someone had written:

A man may have many kinds of dreams. There are dreams he wishes to continue and others he does not. At one hour of the night men may have dreams in which everything is veiled in violet; at others, unpalatable truths may be conveyed. If a certain man *wants certain dreams he may be having to cease, he will wait by the Aqualate Pond at night, and speak to whoever he finds there.*

"This means nothing to me," lied Crome. "Where did you get it?"

"A woman thrust it into my hand two days ago as I came down the Ghibbeline Stair. She spoke your name, or one like it. I saw nothing."

Crome stared at the sheet of paper in his hand. Leaving the Luitpold Café a few minutes later, he heard someone say: "In Aachen, by the Haunted Gate – do you remember? – a woman on the pavement stuffing cakes into her mouth? Sugar cakes into her mouth?"

That night, as Crome made his way reluctantly towards the Aqualate Pond, the moonlight rose in a lemon-yellow tide over the empty cat-infested towers of the city; in the Artists' Quarter the violin and cor anglais pronounced their fitful whine; while from the distant arena – from twenty-five-thousand faces underlit by the flames of the auto-da-fé – issued an interminable whisper of laughter.

It was the anniversary of the liberation of Uroconium from the Analeptic Kings.

Householders lined the steep hill up at Alves. Great velvet banners, featuring black crosses on a red and white ground, hung down the bal-

conies above their naked heads. Their eyes were patiently fixed on the cracked copper dome of the observatory at its summit. (There, as the text sometimes called *The Earl of Rone* remembers, the Kings handed over to Mammy Vooley and her fighters their weapons of appalling power; there they were made to bend the knee.) A single bell rang out, then stopped – a hundred children carrying candles swept silently down towards them and were gone! Others came on behind, shuffling to the rhythms of the "Ou lou lou," that ancient song. In the middle of it all, the night and the banners and the lights, swaying precariously to and fro fifteen feet above the procession like a doll nailed on a gilded chair, came Mammy Vooley herself.

Sometimes as it blows across the Great Brown Waste in summer, the wind will uncover a bit of petrified wood. What oak or mountain ash this wood has come from, alive immeasurably long ago, what secret treaties were made beneath it during the Afternoon of the world only to be broken by the Evening, we do not know. We will never know. It is a kind of wood full of contradictory grains and lines: studded with functionless knots: hard.

Mammy Vooley's head had the shape and the shiny grey look of wood like that. It was provided with one good eye, as if at some time it had grown round a glass marble streaked with milky blue. She bobbed it stiffly right and left to the crowds, who stood to watch her approach, knelt as she passed, and stood up again behind her. Her bearers grunted patiently under the weight of the pole that bore her up. As they brought her slowly closer it could be seen that her dress – so curved between her bony, strangely articulated knees that dead leaves, lumps of plaster, and crusts of whole-meal bread had gathered in her lap – was russet-orange, and that she wore askew on the top of her head a hank of faded purple hair, wispy and fine like a very old woman's. Mammy Vooley, celebrating with black banners and young women chanting; Mammy Vooley, Queen of Uroconium, Moderator of the city, as silent as a log of wood.

Crome got up on tiptoe to watch; he had never seen her before. As she drew level with him she seemed to float in the air, her shadow projected on a cloud of candle smoke by the lemon-yellow moon. That afternoon, for the ceremony, in her *salle* or retiring room (where at night she

might be heard singing to herself in different voices), they had painted on her face another one – approximate, like a doll's, with pink cheeks. All round Crome's feet the householders of Alves knelt in the gutter. He stared at them. Mammy Vooley caught him standing.

She waved down at her bearers.

"Stop!" she whispered.

"I bless all my subjects," she told the kneeling crowd. "Even this one."

And she allowed her head to fall exhaustedly on one side.

In a moment she had passed by. The remains of the procession followed her, trailing its smell of candle fat and sweating feet, and vanished round a corner towards Montrouge. (Young men and women fought for the privilege of carrying the Queen. As the new bearers tried to take it from the old ones, Mammy Vooley's pole swung backwards and forwards in uncontrollable arcs so that she flopped about in her chair at the top of it like the head of a mop. Wrestling silently, the small figures carried her away.) In the streets below Alves there was a sense of relief: smiling and chattering and remarking how well the Mammy had looked that day, the householders took down the banners and folded them in tissue paper.

"…so regal in her new dress."

"So clean…"

"…and such a healthy colour!"

But Crome continued to look down the street for a long time after it was empty. Marguerite petals had fallen among the splashes of candle grease on the cobbled setts. He couldn't think how they came to be there. He picked some up in his hand and raised them to his face. A vivid recollection came to him of the smell of flowering privet in the suburbs of Soubridge when he was a boy, the late snapdragons and nasturtiums in the gardens. Suddenly he shrugged. He got directions to the narrow lane which would take him west of Alves to the Aqualate Pond, and having found it walked up it rapidly. Fireworks burst from the arena, fizzing and flashing directly overhead; the walls of the houses danced and warped in the warm red light; his own shadow followed him along them, huge, misshapen, intermittent.

*

Crome shivered.

"Whatever is in the Aqualate Pond," Ingo Lympany the dramatist had once told him, "it's not water."

On the shore in front of a terrace of small shabby houses he had already found a kind of gibbet made of two great arched, bleached bones. From it swung a corpse whose sex he couldn't determine, upright in a tight wicker basket which creaked in the wind. The pond lay as still as Lympany had predicted, and it smelled of lead.

"Again, you see, everyone agrees it's a small pool, a very small one. But when you are standing by it, on the Henrietta Street side, you would swear that it stretched right off to the horizon. The winds there seem to have come such a distance. Because of this the people in Henrietta Street believe they are living by an ocean, and make all the observances fishermen make. For instance, they say that a man can only die when the pool is ebbing. His bed must be oriented the same way as the floorboards, and at the moment of death doors and windows should be opened, mirrors covered with a clean white cloth, and all fires extinguished. And so on."

They believed, too, at least the older ones did, that huge fish had once lived there.

"There are no tides of course, and fish of any kind are rarely found there now. All the same, in Henrietta Street once a year they bring out a large stuffed pike, freshly varnished and with a bouquet of thistles in its mouth, and walk up and down the causeway with it, singing and shouting.

"And then – it's so hard to explain! – *echoes* go out over that stuff in the pool whenever you move, especially in the evening when the city is quiet: echoes and echoes of echoes, as though it were contained in some huge vacant metal building. But when you look up there is only the sky."

"Well, Lympany," said Crome aloud to himself. "You were right."

He yawned. Whistling thinly and flapping his arms against his sides to keep warm, he paced to and fro underneath the gibbet. When he stood on the meagre strip of pebbles at its edge, a chill seemed to

seep out of the pool and into his bones. Behind him Henrietta Street stretched away, lugubrious and potholed. He promised himself, as he had done several times that night, that if he turned round, and looked down it, and still saw no one, he would go home. Afterwards he could never quite describe to himself what he had seen.

Fireworks flickered a moment in the dark, like the tremulous reflections made by a bath of water on the walls and ceilings of an empty room, and were gone. While they lasted, Henrietta Street was all boarded-up windows and bluish shadows. He had the impression that as he turned it had just been vacated by a number of energetic figures – quiet, agile men who dodged into dark corners or flung themselves over the rotting fences and iron railings, or simply ran off very fast down the middle of the road *precisely so that he shouldn't see them.* At the same time he saw, or thought he saw, one real figure do all these things, as if it had been left behind by the rest, staring white-faced over its shoulder at him in total silence as it sprinted erratically from one feeble refuge to another, and then vanishing abruptly between some houses.

Overlaid, as it were, on both this action and the potential or completed action it suggested, was a woman in a brown cloak. At first she was tiny and distant, trudging up Henrietta Street towards him; then, without any transitional state at all, she had appeared in the middle ground, posed like a piece of statuary between the puddles, white and naked with one arm held up (behind her it was possible to glimpse for an instant three other women, but not to see what they were doing – except that they seemed to be plaiting flowers); finally, with appalling suddenness, she filled his whole field of vision, as if on the Unter-Main-Kai a passerby had leapt in front of him without warning and screamed in his face. He gave a violent start and jumped backwards so quickly that he fell over. By the time he was able to get up the sky was dark again, Henrietta Street empty, everything as it had been.

The woman, though, awaited him silently in the shadows beneath the gibbet, wrapped in her cloak like a sculpture wrapped in brown paper, and wearing over her head a complicated mask made of wafery metal to represent the head of one or another wasteland insect. Crome found that he had bitten his tongue. He approached her cautiously, holding

out in front of him at arm's length the paper Verdigris had given him.

"Did you send me this?" he said.

"Yes."

"Do I know you?"

"No."

"What must I do to stop these dreams?"

She laughed. Echoes fled away over the Aqualate Pond.

"Kill the Mammy," she said.

Crome looked at her.

"You must be mad," he said. "Whoever you are."

"Wait," she recommended to him, "and we'll see who's mad."

She lowered the corpse in its wicker cage – the chains and pulleys of the gibbet gave a rusty creak – and pulled it towards her by its feet. Momentarily it escaped her and danced in a circle, coy and sad. She recaptured it with a murmur. "Hush now. Hush." Crome backed away. "Look," he whispered, "I – " Before he could say anything else, she had slipped her hand deftly between the osiers and, like a woman gutting fish on a cold Wednesday morning at Lowth, opened the corpse from diaphragm to groin. "Man or woman?" she asked him, up to her elbows in it. "Which would you say?" A filthy smell filled the air and then dissipated. "I don't want – " said Crome. But she had already turned back to him and was offering him her hands, cupped, in a way that gave him no option but to see what she had found – or made – for him.

"Look!"

A dumb, doughy shape writhed and fought against itself on her palms, swelling quickly from the size of a dried pea to that of a newly born dog. It was, he saw, contained by vague and curious lights which came and went; then by a cream-coloured fog which was perhaps only a blurring of its own spatial, limits; and at last by a damp membrane, pink and grey, which it burst suddenly by butting and lunging. It was the lamb he had seen in his dreams, shivering and bleating and tottering in its struggle to stand, the eyes fixed on him forever in its complaisant, bone-white face. It seemed already to be sickening in the cold leaden breath of the pond.

"Kill the Mammy," said the woman with the insect's head, "and in

a few days' time you will be free. I will bring you a weapon soon."

"All right," said Crome.

He turned and ran.

He heard the lamb bleating after him the length of Henrietta Street, and behind that the sound of the sea, rolling and grinding the great stones in the tide.

For some days this image preoccupied him. The lamb made its way without fuss into his waking life. Wherever he looked he thought he saw it looking back at him: from an upper window in the Artists' Quarter, or framed by the dusty iron railings which line the streets there, or from between the chestnut trees in an empty park.

Isolated in a way he had not been since he first arrived in Uroconium wearing his green plush country waistcoat and yellow pointed shoes, he decided to tell no one what had happened by the Aqualate Pond. Then he thought he would tell Ansel Verdigris and Ingo Lympany. But Lympany had gone to Cladich to escape his creditors – and Verdigris, who after eating the tablecloth was no longer welcomed at the Luitpold Café, had left the Quarter too: at the large old house in Delpine Square there was only his mother – a bit lonely in her bath chair, though still a striking woman with a great curved nose and a faint, heady smell of elder blossom – who said vaguely, "I'm sure I can remember what he said," but in the end could not.

"I wonder if you know, Ardwick Crome, how I worry about his *bowels,"* she went on. "As his friend you must worry, too, for they are very lazy, and he will not encourage them if we do not!"

It was, she said, a family failing.

She offered Crome chamomile tea, which he refused, and then got him to run an errand for her to a fashionable chemist's in Mynned. After that he could do nothing but go home and wait.

Kristodulos Fleece – half dead with opium and syphilis, and notoriously self-critical – had left behind him when he vacated the northlight studio a small picture. Traditionally it remained there. Succeeding occupants had taken heart from its technical brio and uncustomary good humour (although Audsley King was reputed to have turned it to

the wall during her brief period in Montrouge because she detected in it some unforgivable sentimentality or other) and no dealer in the Quarter would buy it for fear of bad luck. Crome now removed it to the corner above the cheap tin washstand so that he could see it from his bed.

Oil on canvas, about a foot square, it depicted in some detail a scene the artist had called "Children beloved of the gods have the power to weep roses." The children, mainly girls, were seen dancing under an elder tree, the leafless branches of which had been decorated with strips of rag. Behind them stretched away rough common land, with clumps of gorse and a few bare, graceful birch saplings, to where the upper windows and thatch of a low cottage could be made out. The lighthearted vigour of the dancers, who were winding themselves round the tallest girl in a spiral like a clock spring, was contrasted with the stillness of the late-winter afternoon, its sharp clear airs and horizontal light. Crome had often watched this dance as a boy, though he had never been allowed to take part in it. He remembered the tranquil shadows on the grass, the chant, the rose and green colours of the sky. As soon as the dancers had wound the spiral tight, they would begin to tread on one another's toes, laughing and shrieking – or, changing to a different tune, jump up and down beneath the tree while one of them shouted, "A bundle of rags!"

It was perhaps as sentimental a picture as Audsley King had claimed. But Crome, who saw a lamb in every corner, had never seen one there; and when she came as she had promised, the woman with the insect's head found him gazing so quietly up at it from the trapezium of moonlight falling across his bed that he looked like the effigy on a tomb. She stood in the doorway, perhaps thinking he had died and escaped her.

"I can't undo myself," he said.

The mask glittered faintly. Did he hear her breathing beneath it? Before he could make up his mind there was a scuffling on the stairs behind her and she turned to say something he couldn't quite catch – though it might have been: "Don't come in yourself."

"These straps are so old," he explained. "My father – "

"All right, give it to me, then," she said impatiently to whoever was outside. "Now go away." And she shut the door. Footsteps went down

the stairs; it was so quiet in Montrouge that you could hear them clearly going away down flight after flight, scraping in the dust on a landing, catching in the cracked linoleum. The street door opened and closed. She waited, leaning against the door, until they had gone off down the empty pavements towards Mynned and the Ghibbeline Passage, then said, "I had better untie you." But instead she walked over to the end of Crome's bed, and sitting on it with her back to him stared thoughtfully at the picture of the elder-tree dance.

"You were clever to find this," she told him. She stood up again, and, peering at it, ignored him when he said:

"It was in the other room when I came."

"I suppose someone helped you," she said. "Well, it won't matter." Suddenly she demanded, "Do you like it here among the rats? Why must you live here?"

He was puzzled.

"I don't know."

A shout went up in the distance, long and whispering like a deeply drawn breath. Roman candles sailed up into the night one after the other, exploding in the east below the zenith so that the collapsing pantile roofs of Montrouge stood out sharp and black. Light poured in, ran off the back of the chair and along the belly of the enamel jug, and, discovering a book or a box here, a broken pencil there, threw them into merciless relief. Yellow or gold, ruby, greenish-white: with each new pulse the angles of the room grew more equivocal.

"Oh, it is the stadium!" cried the woman with the insect's head. "They have begun early tonight!"

She laughed and clapped her hands. Crome stared at her.

"Clowns will be capering in the great light!" she said.

Quickly she undid his straps.

"Look!"

Propped up against the whitewashed wall by the door she had left a long brown paper parcel hastily tied with string. Fat or grease had escaped from it, and it looked as if it might contain a fish. While she fetched it for him, Crome sat on the edge of the bed with his elbows on his knees, rubbing his face. She carried it hieratically, across her out-

stretched arms, her image advancing and receding in the intermittent light.

"I want you to see clearly what we are going to lend you."

When the fireworks had stopped at last, an ancient white ceramic sheath came out of the paper. It was about two feet long, and it had been in the ground for a long time, yellowing to the colour of ivory and collecting a craquelure of fine lines like an old sink. Chemicals seeping through the soils of the Great Waste had left here and there on it faint blue stains. The weapon it contained had a matching hilt – although by now it was a much darker colour from years of handling – and from the juncture of the two had leaked some greenish, jelly-like substance which the woman with the insect's head was careful not to touch. She knelt on the bare floorboards at Crome's feet, her back and shoulders curved round the weapon, and slowly pulled hilt and sheath apart.

At once a smell filled the room, thick and stale like wet ashes in a dust-bin. Pallid oval motes of light, some the size of a birch leaf, others hardly visible, drifted up towards the ceiling. They congregated in corners and did not disperse, while the weapon, buzzing torpidly, drew a dull violet line after it in the gloom as the woman with the insect's head moved it slowly to and fro in front of her. She seemed to be fascinated by it. Like all those things it had been dug up out of some pit. It had come to the city through the Analeptic Kings, how long ago no one knew. Crome pulled his legs up onto the bed out of its way.

"I don't want that," he said.

"Take it!"

"No."

"You don't understand. She is trying to change the name of the city!"

"I don't want it. I don't care."

"Take it. Touch it. It's yours now."

"No!"

"Very well," she said quietly. "But don't imagine the painting will help you again." She threw it on the bed near him. "Look at it," she said. She laughed disgustedly. "'Children beloved of the gods'!" she said. "Is that why he waited for them outside the washhouses twice a week?"

The dance was much as it had been, but now with the fading light the dancers had removed themselves to the garden of the cottage, where they seemed frozen and awkward, as if they could only imitate the gaiety they had previously felt. They were dancing in the shadow of the *bredogue,* which someone had thrust out of an open window beneath the earth-coloured eaves. In Soubridge, and in the midlands generally, they make this pitiful thing – with its bottle-glass eyes and crepe-paper harness – out of the stripped and varnished skull of a horse, put up on a pole covered with an ordinary sheet. This one, though, had the skull of a well-grown lamb, which seemed to move as Crome looked.

"What have you done?" he whispered. "Where is the picture as it used to be?"

The lamb gaped its lower jaw slackly over the unsuspecting children to vomit on them its bad luck. Then, clothed with flesh again, it turned its white and pleading face on Crome, who groaned and threw the painting across the room and held out his hand.

"Give me the sword from under the ground, then," he said.

When the hilt of it touched his hand he felt a faint sickly shock. The bones of his arm turned to jelly and the rank smell of ashpits enfolded him. It was the smell of a continent of wet cinders, buzzing with huge papery-winged flies under a poisonous brown sky; the smell of Cheminor, and Mammy Vooley, and the Aqualate Pond; it was the smell of the endless wastes which surround Uroconium and everything else that is left of the world. The woman with the insect's head looked at him with satisfaction. A knock came at the door.

"Go away!" she shouted. "You will ruin everything!"

"I'm to see that he's touched it," said a muffled voice. "I'm to make sure of that before I go back."

She shrugged impatiently and opened the door.

"Be quick then," she said.

In came Ansel Verdigris, stinking of lemon genever and wearing an extraordinary yellow satin shirt which made his face look like a corpse's. His coxcomb, freshly dyed that afternoon at some barber's in the Tinmarket, stuck up from his scalp in exotic scarlet spikes and feathers. Ignoring Crome, and giving the woman with the insect's head

only the briefest of placatory nods, he made a great show of looking for the weapon. He sniffed the air. He picked up the discarded sheath and sniffed that. (He licked his finger and went to touch the stuff that had leaked from it, but at the last moment he changed his mind.) He stared up at the vagrant motes of light in the corners of the room, as if he could divine something from the way they wobbled and bobbed against the ceiling.

When he came to the bed he looked intently but with no sign of recognition into Crome's face.

"Oh yes," he said. "He's touched it all right."

He laughed. He tapped the side of his nose, and winked. Then he ran round and round the room crowing like a cock, his mouth gaping open and his tongue extended, until he fell over Kristodulos Fleece's painting, which lay against the skirtingboard where Crome had flung it. "Oh, he's touched it all right," he said, leaning exhaustedly against the door frame. He held the picture away from him at arm's length and looked at it with his head on one side. "Anyone could see that." His expression became pensive. "Anyone."

"The sword is in his hand," said the woman with the insect's head. "If you can tell us only what we see already, get out."

"It isn't you that wants to know," Verdigris answered flatly, as if he was thinking of something else. He propped the painting up against his thigh and passed the fingers of both hands several times rapidly through his hair. All at once he went and stood in the middle of the room on one leg, from which position he grinned at her insolently and began to sing in a thin musical treble like a boy at a feast:

> "I choose you one, I choose you all,
> I pray I might go to the ball."

"Get out!" she shouted.

"The ball is mine," sang Verdigris,

> "and none of yours,
> Go to the woods and gather flowers.

Cats and kittens abide within
But we *court ladies* walk out and in!"

Some innuendo in the last line seemed to enrage her. She clenched her fists and brought them up to the sides of the mask, the feathery antennae of which quivered and trembled like a wasp's.

"Sting me!" taunted Verdigris. "Go on!"

She shuddered.

He tucked the painting under his arm and prepared to leave.

"Wait!" begged Crome, who had watched them with growing puzzlement and horror. "Verdigris, you must know that it is me! Why aren't you saying anything? What's happening?"

Verdigris, already in the doorway, turned round and gazed at Crome for a moment with an expression almost benign, then, curling his upper lip, he mimicked contemptuously, "'Verdigris, you've never *been* to Cheminor. *Neither* of us has.'" He spat on the floor and touched the phlegm he had produced with his toe, eyeing it with qualified disapproval. "Well, I have now, Crome. I have now." Crome saw that under their film of triumph his eyes were full of fear; his footsteps echoed down into the street and off into the ringing spaces of Montrouge and the Old City.

"Give the weapon to me," said the woman with the insect's head. As she put it back in its sheath it gave out briefly the smells of rust, decaying horse hair, vegetable water. She seemed indecisive. "He won't come back," she said once. "I promise." But Crome would not look away from the wall. She went here and there in the room, blowing dust off a pile of books and reading a line or two in one of them, opening the door into the north-light studio and closing it again immediately, tapping her fingers on the edge of the washstand. "I'm sorry about the painting," she said. Crome could think of nothing to say to that. The floorboards creaked; the bed moved. When he opened his eyes she was lying next to him.

All the rest of the night her strange long body moved over him in the unsteady illumination from the skylight. The insect mask hung above him like a question, with its huge faceted eyes and its jaws of filigree

steel plate. He heard her breath in it, distinctly, and once thought he saw through it parts of her real face, pale lips, a cheekbone, an ordinary human eye: but he would not speak to her. The outer passages of the observatory at Alves are full of an ancient grief. The light falls as if it has been strained through muslin. The air is cold and moves unpredictably. It is the grief of the old machines, which, unfulfilled, whisper suddenly to themselves and are silent again for a century. No one knows what to do with them. No one knows how to assuage them. A faint sour panic seems to cling to them: they laugh as you go past, or extend a curious yellow film of light like a wing.

"Ou lou lou" sounds from these passages almost daily – more or less distant with each current of air – for Mammy Vooley is often here. No one knows why. It is clear that she herself is uncertain. If it is pride in her victory over the Analeptic Kings, why does she sit alone in an alcove, staring out of the windows? The Mammy who comes here to brood is not the doll-like figure which processes the city on Fridays and holidays. She will not wear her wig, or let them make up her face. She is a constant trial to them. She sings quietly and tunelessly to herself, and the plaster falls from the damp ceilings into her lap. A dead mouse has now come to rest there and she will allow no one to remove it.

At the back of the observatory, the hill of Alves continues to rise a little. This knoll of ancient compacted rubbish, excavated into caves, mean dwellings, and cemeteries, is called Antedaraus because it drops away sheer into the Daraus Gorge. Behind it, on the western side of the gorge (which from above can be seen to divide Uroconium like a fissure in a wart), rise the ruinous towers of the Old City. Perhaps a dozen of them still stand, mysterious with spires and fluted mouldings and glazed blue tiles, among the blackened hulks of those that fell during the City Wars. Every few minutes one or another of them sounds a bell, the feathery appeal of which fills the night from the streets below Alves to the shore of the Aqualate Pond, from Montrouge to the arena: in consequence the whole of Uroconium seems silent and tenantless – empty, littered, obscure, a city of worn-out enthusiasms.

Mammy Vooley hasn't time for those old towers, or for the mountains which rise beyond them to throw a shadow ten miles long across

the bleak watersheds and shallow boggy valleys outside the city. It is the decayed terraces of the Antedaraus that preoccupy her. They are overgrown with mutant ivy and stifled whins; along them groups of mourners go, laden with anemones for the graves. Sour earth spills from the burst revetments between the beggars' houses, full of the rubbish of generations and strewn with dark red petals which give forth a sad odour in the rain. All day long the lines of women pass up and down the hill. They have with them the corpse of a baby in a box covered with flowers; behind them comes a boy dragging a coffin lid; Mammy Vooley nods and smiles.

Everything her subjects do here is of interest to her: on the same evening that Crome found himself outside the observatory – fearfully clutching under his coat the weapon from the waste – she sat in the pervasive gloom somewhere in the corridors, listening with tilted head and lively eyes to a hoarse muted voice calling out from under the Antedaraus. After a few minutes a man came out of a hole in the ground and with a great effort began pulling himself about in the sodden vegetation, dragging behind him a wicker basket of earth and excrement. He had, she saw, no legs. When he was forced to rest, he looked vacantly into the air; the rain fell into his face but he didn't seem to notice it. He called out again. There was no answer. Eventually he emptied the basket and crawled back into the ground.

"Ah!" whispered Mammy Vooley, and sat forward expectantly.

She was already late; but she waved her attendants away when for the third time they brought her the wig and the wooden crown.

"Was it necessary to come here so publicly?" muttered Crome.

The woman with the insect's head was silent. When that morning he had asked her, "Where would you go if you could leave this city?" she had answered, "On a ship." And, when he stared at her, added, "In the night. I would find my father."

But now she only said:

"Hush. Hush now. You will not be here long."

A crowd had been gathering all afternoon by the wide steps of the observatory. Ever since Mammy Vooley's arrival in the city it had been

customary for "sides" of young boys to dance on these steps on a certain day in November, in front of the gaunt wooden images of the Analeptic Kings. Everything was ready. Candles thickened the air with the smell of fat. The kings had been brought out, and now loomed inert in the gathering darkness, their immense defaced heads lumpish and threatening. The choir could be heard from inside the observatory, practising and coughing, practising and coughing, under that dull cracked dome which absorbs every echo like felt. The little boys – they were seven or eight years old – huddled together on the seeping stones, pale and grave in their outlandish costumes. They were coughing, too, in the dampness that creeps down every winter from the Antedaraus.

"This weapon is making me ill," said Crome. "What must I do? Where is she?"

"Hush."

At last the dancers were allowed to take their places about halfway up the steps, where they stood in a line looking nervously at one another until the music signalled them to begin. The choir was marshalled, and sang its famous "Renunciative" cantos, above which rose the whine of the cor anglais and the thudding of a large flat drum. The little boys revolved slowly in simple, strict figures, with expressions inturned and languid. For every two paces forward, it had been decreed, they must take two back.

Soon Mammy Vooley was pushed into view at the top of the steps, in a chair with four iron wheels. Her head lolled against its curved back. Attendants surrounded her immediately, young men and women in stiff embroidered robes who after a perfunctory bow set about ordering her wisp of hair or arranging her feet on a padded stool. They held a huge book up in front of her single milky eye and then placed in her lap the crown or wreath of woven yew twigs which she would later throw to the dancing boys. Throughout the dance she stared uninterestedly up into the sky, but as soon as it was finished and they had helped her to sit up she proclaimed in a distant yet eager voice:

"Even these were humbled."

She made them open the book in front of her again, at a different page. She had brought it with her from the North.

"Even these kings were made to bend the knee," she read.

The crowd cheered.

She was unable after all to throw the wreath, although her hands picked disconnectedly at it for some seconds. In the end it was enough for her to let it slip out of her lap and fall among the boys, who scrambled with solemn faces down the observatory steps after it while her attendants showered them with crystallised geranium petals and other coloured sweets, and in the crowd their parents urged them, "Quick now!"

The rain came on in earnest, putting out some of the candles; the wreath rolled about on the bottom step like a coin set spinning on a table in the Luitpold Café, then toppled over and was still. The quickest boy had claimed it, Mammy Vooley's head had fallen to one side again, and they were preparing to close the great doors behind her, when shouting and commotion broke out in the observatory itself and a preposterous figure in a yellow satin shirt burst onto the steps near her chair. It was Ansel Verdigris. He had spewed black-currant gin down his chest, and his coxcomb, now dishevelled and lax, was plastered across his sweating forehead like a smear of blood. He still clutched under one arm the painting he had taken from Crome's room: this he began to wave about in the air above his head with both hands, so strenuously that the frame broke and the canvas flapped loose from it.

"Wait!" he shouted.

The woman with the insect's head gave a great sideways jump of surprise, like a horse. She stared at Verdigris for a second as if she didn't know what to do, then pushed Crome in the back with the flat of her hand.

"Now!" she hissed urgently. "Go and kill her now or it will be too late!"

"What?" said Crome.

As he fumbled at the hilt of the weapon, poison seemed to flow up his arm and into his neck. Whitish motes leaked out of the front of his coat and, stinking of the ashpit, wobbled heavily past his face up into the damp air. The people nearest him moved away sharply, their expressions puzzled and nervous.

"Plotters are abroad," Ansel Verdigris was shouting, "in this very crowd!"

He looked for some confirmation from the inert figure of Mammy Vooley, but she ignored him and only gazed exhaustedly into space while the rain turned the bread crumbs in her lap to paste. He squealed with terror and threw the painting on the floor.

"People stared at this picture," he said. He kicked it. "They knelt in front of it. They have dug up an old weapon and wait now to kill Mammy!"

He sobbed. He caught sight of Crome.

"Him!" he shouted. "There! There!"

"What has he done?" whispered Crome.

He dragged the sword out from under his coat and threw away its sheath. The crowd fell back immediately, some of them gasping and retching at its smell. Crome ran up the steps holding it out awkwardly in front of him, and hit Ansel Verdigris on the head with it. Buzzing dully, it cut down through the front of Verdigris's skull, then, deflected by the bridge of his nose, skidded off the bony orbit of the eye and hacked into his shoulder. His knees buckled and his arm on that side fell off. He went to pick it up and then changed his mind, glaring angrily at Crome instead and working the glistening white bones of his jaw. "Bugger," he said. "Ur." He marched unsteadily about at the top of the steps, laughing and pointing at his own head.

"I wanted this," he said thickly to the crowd. "It's just what I wanted!" Eventually he stumbled over the painting, fell down the steps with his remaining arm swinging out loosely, and was still.

Crome turned round and tried to hit Mammy Vooley with the weapon, but he found that it had gone out like a wet firework. Only the ceramic hilt was left – blackened, stinking of fish, giving out a few grey motes which moved around feebly and soon died. When he saw this he was so relieved that he sat down. An enormous tiredness seemed to have settled in the back of his neck. Realising that they were safe, Mammy Vooley's attendants rushed out of the observatory and dragged him to his feet again. One of the first to reach him was the woman with the insect's head.

"I suppose I'll be sent to the arena now," he said.

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged.

"The thing seems to be stuck to my hand," he told her. "Do you know anything about it? How to get it off?"

But it was his hand, he found, that was at fault. It had swollen into a thick clubbed mass the colour of overcooked mutton, in which the hilt of the weapon was now embedded. He could just see part of it protruding. If he shook his arm, waves of numbness came up it; it did no good anyway, he couldn't let go.

"I hated my rooms," he said. "But I wish I was back in them now."

"I was betrayed, too, you know," she said.

Later, while two women supported her head, Mammy Vooley peered into Crome's face as if trying to remember where she had seen him before. She was trembling, he noticed, with fear or rage. Her eye was filmed and watery, and a smell of stale food came up out of her lap. He expected her to say something to him but she only looked, and after a short time signed to the women to push her away. "I forgive all my subjects," she announced to the crowd. "Even this one." As an afterthought she added, "Good news! Henceforth this city will be called Vira Co, 'the City in the Waste.'" Then she had the choir brought forward. As he was led away Crome heard it strike up "Ou lou lou," that ancient song:

Ou lou lou lou
Ou lou lou
Ou lou lou lou
Ou lou lou
Ou lou lou lou
Lou Lou lou lou
Ou lou lou lou
Lou
Lou
Lou

Soon the crowd was singing too.

In the Hills, the Cities

CLIVE BARKER

IT WASN'T UNTIL the first week of the Yugoslavian trip that Mick discovered what a political bigot he'd chosen as a lover. Certainly, he'd been warned. One of the queens at the Baths had told him Judd was to the Right of Attila the Hun, but the man had been one of Judd's ex-affairs, and Mick had presumed there was more spite than perception in the character assassination.

If only he'd listened. Then he wouldn't be driving along an interminable road in a Volkswagen that suddenly seemed the size of a coffin, listening to Judd's views on Soviet expansionism. Jesus, he was so boring. He didn't converse, he lectured, and endlessly. In Italy the sermon had been on the way the Communists had exploited the peasant vote. Now, in Yugoslavia, Judd had really warmed to this theme, and Mick was just about ready to take a hammer to his self-opinionated head.

It wasn't that he disagreed with everything Judd said. Some of the arguments (the ones Mick understood) seemed quite sensible. But then, what did he know? He was a dance teacher. Judd was a journalist, a professional pundit. He felt, like most journalists Mick had encountered, that he was obliged to have an opinion on everything under the sun. Especially politics; that was the best trough to wallow in. You could get your snout, eyes, head and front hooves in that mess of muck and have a fine old time splashing around. It was an inexhaustible subject to devour, a swill with a little of everything in it, because everything, according to Judd, was political. The arts were political. Sex was

political. Religion, commerce, gardening, eating, drinking and farting – all political.

Jesus, it was mind-blowingly boring; killingly, love-deadeningly boring.

Worse still, Judd didn't seem to notice how bored Mick had become, or if he noticed, he didn't care. He just rambled on, his arguments getting windier and windier, his sentences lengthening with every mile they drove.

Judd, Mick had decided, was a selfish bastard, and as soon as their honeymoon was over he'd part with the guy.

It was not until their trip, that endless, motiveless caravan through the graveyards of mid-European culture, that Judd realized what a political lightweight he had in Mick. The guy showed precious little interest in the economics or the politics of the countries they passed through. He registered indifference to the full facts behind the Italian situation, and yawned, yes, yawned when he tried (and failed) to debate the Russian threat to world peace. He had to face the bitter truth: Mick was a queen; there was no other word for him; all right, perhaps he didn't mince or wear jewelry to excess, but he was a queen nevertheless, happy to wallow in a dreamworld of early Renaissance frescoes and Yugoslavian icons. The complexities, the contradictions, even the agonies that made those cultures blossom and wither were just tiresome to him. His mind was no deeper than his looks; he was a well-groomed nobody.

Some honeymoon.

The road south from Belgrade to Novi Pazar was, by Yugoslavian standards, a good one. There were fewer potholes than on many of the roads they'd travelled, and it was relatively straight. The town of Novi Pazar lay in the valley of the River Raska, south of the city named after the river. It wasn't an area particularly popular with the tourists. Despite the good road it was still inaccessible, and lacked sophisticated amenities; but Mick was determined to see the monastery at Sopocani, to the west of the town, and after some bitter argument, he'd won.

The journey had proved uninspiring. On either side of the road

the cultivated fields looked parched and dusty. The summer had been unusually hot, and droughts were affecting many of the villages. Crops had failed, and livestock had been prematurely slaughtered to prevent them dying of malnutrition. There was a defeated look about the few faces they glimpsed at the roadside. Even the children had dour expressions; brows as heavy as the stale heat that hung over the valley.

Now, with the cards on the table after a row at Belgrade, they drove in silence most of the time; but the straight road, like most straight roads, invited dispute. When the driving was easy, the mind rooted for something to keep it engaged. What better than a fight?

"Why the hell do you want to see this damn monastery?" Judd demanded.

It was an unmistakable invitation.

"We've come all this way…" Mick tried to keep the tone conversational. He wasn't in the mood for an argument.

"More fucking Virgins, is it?"

Keeping his voice as even as he could, Mick picked up the *Guide* and read aloud from it: "…there, some of the greatest works of Serbian painting can still be seen and enjoyed, including what many commentators agree to be the enduring masterpiece of the Raska school: *The Dormition of the Virgin*."

Silence.

Then Judd: "I'm up to here with churches."

"It's a masterpiece."

"They're all masterpieces according to that bloody book."

Mick felt his control slipping.

"Two and a half hours at most –"

"I told you, I don't want to see another church; the smell of the places makes me sick. Stale incense, old sweat and lies…"

"It's a short detour; then we can get back on to the road and you can give me another lecture on farming subsidies in the Sandzak."

"I'm just trying to get some decent conversation going instead of this endless tripe about Serbian fucking masterpieces –"

"Stop the car!"

"What?"

"Stop the car!"

Judd pulled the Volkswagen onto the side of the road. Mick got out.

The road was hot, but there was a slight breeze. He took a deep breath, and wandered into the middle of the road. Empty of traffic and of pedestrians in both directions. In every direction, empty. The hills shimmered in the heat off the fields. There were wild poppies growing in the ditches. Mick crossed the road, squatted on his haunches and picked one.

Behind him he heard the VW's door slam.

"What did you stop us for?" Judd said. His voice was edgy, still hoping for that argument, begging for it.

Mick stood up, playing with the poppy. It was close to seeding, late in the season. The petals fell from the receptacle as soon as he touched them, little splashes of red fluttering down on to the grey tarmac.

"I asked you a question," Judd said again.

Mick looked around. Judd was standing along the far side of the car, his brows a knitted line of burgeoning anger. But handsome; oh yes; a face that made women weep with frustration that he was gay. A heavy black moustache (perfectly trimmed) and eyes you could watch forever, and never see the same light in them twice. Why in God's name, thought Mick, does a man as fine as that have to be such an insensitive little shit?

Judd returned the look of contemptuous appraisal, staring at the pouting pretty boy across the road. It made him want to puke, seeing the little act Mick was performing for his benefit. It might just have been plausible in a sixteen-year-old virgin. In a twenty-five-year-old, it lacked credibility.

Mick dropped the flower, and untucked his T-shirt from his jeans. A tight stomach, then a slim, smooth chest were revealed as he pulled it off. His hair was ruffled when his head reappeared, and his face wore a broad grin. Judd looked at the torso. Neat, not too muscular. An appendix scar peering over his faded jeans. A gold chain, small but catching the sun, dipped in the hollow of his throat. Without meaning to, he returned Mick's grin, and a kind of peace was made between them.

Mick was unbuckling his belt.

"Want to fuck?" he said, the grin not faltering.

"It's no use," came an answer, though not to that question.

"What isn't?"

"We're not compatible."

"Want a bet?"

Now he was unzipped, and turning away towards the wheat field that bordered the road.

Judd watched as Mick cut a swathe through the swaying sea, his back the color of the grain, so that he was almost camouflaged by it. It was a dangerous game, screwing in the open air – this wasn't San Francisco, or even Hampstead Heath. Nervously, Judd glanced along the road. Still empty in both directions. And Mick was turning, deep in the field, turning and smiling and waving like a swimmer buoyed up in a golden surf. What the hell…there was nobody to see, nobody to know. Just the hills, liquid in the heat-haze, their forested backs bent to the business of the earth, and a lost dog, sitting at the edge of the road, waiting for some lost master.

Judd followed Mick's path through the wheat, unbuttoning his shirt as he walked. Field mice ran ahead of him, scurrying through the stalks as the giant came their way, his feet like thunder. Judd saw their panic, and smiled. He meant no harm to them, but then how were they to know that? Maybe he'd put out a hundred lives, mice, beetles, worms, before he reached the spot where Mick was lying, stark bollock naked, on a bed of trampled grain, still grinning.

It was good love they made, good, strong love, equal in pleasure for both; there was a precision to their passion, sensing the moment when effortless delight became urgent, when desire became necessity. They locked together, limb around limb, tongue around tongue, in a knot only orgasm could untie, their backs alternately scorched and scratched as they rolled around exchanging blows and kisses. In the thick of it, creaming together, they heard the phut-phut-phut of a tractor passing by; but they were past caring.

They made their way back to the Volkswagen with body-threshed

wheat in their hair and their ears, in their socks and between their toes. Their grins had been replaced with easy smiles: the truce, if not permanent, would last a few hours at least.

The car was baking hot, and they had to open all the windows and doors to let the breeze cool it before they started towards Novi Pazar. It was four o'clock, and there was still an hour's driving ahead.

As they got into the car Mick said, "We'll forget the monastery, eh?"

Judd gaped.

"I thought – "

"I couldn't bear another fucking Virgin – "

They laughed lightly together, then kissed, tasting each other and themselves, a mingling of saliva, and the aftertaste of salt semen.

The following day was bright, but not particularly warm. No blue skies: just an even layer of white cloud. The morning air was sharp in the lining of the nostrils, like ether, or peppermint.

Vaslav Jelovsek watched the pigeons in the main square of Popolac courting death as they skipped and fluttered ahead of the vehicles that were buzzing around. Some about military business, some civilian. An air of sober intention barely suppressed the excitement he felt on this day, an excitement he knew was shared by every man, woman and child in Popolac. Shared by the pigeons too for all he knew. Maybe that was why they played under the wheels with such dexterity, knowing that on this day of days no harm could come to them.

He scanned the sky again, that same white sky he'd been peering at since dawn. The cloud-layer was low; not ideal for the celebrations. A phrase passed through his mind, an English phrase he'd heard from a friend, "to have your head in the clouds." It meant, he gathered, to be lost in a reverie, in a white, sightless dream. That, he thought wryly, was all the West knew about clouds, that they stood for dreams. It took a vision they lacked to make a truth out of that casual turn of phrase. Here, in these secret hills, wouldn't they create a spectacular reality from those idle words? A living proverb.

A head in the clouds.

Already the first contingent was assembling in the square. There were

one or two absentees owing to illness, but the auxiliaries were ready and waiting to take their places. Such eagerness! Such wide smiles when an auxiliary heard his or her name and number called and was taken out of line to join the limb that was already taking shape. On every side, miracles of organization. Everyone with a job to do and a place to go. There was no shouting or pushing: indeed, voices were scarcely raised above an eager whisper. He watched in admiration as the work of positioning and buckling and roping went on.

It was going to be a long and arduous day. Vaslav had been in the square since an hour before dawn, drinking coffee from imported plastic cups, discussing the half-hourly meteorological reports coming in from Pristina and Mitrovica, and watching the starless sky as the grey light of morning crept across it. Now he was drinking his sixth coffee of the day, and it was still barely seven o'clock. Across the square Metzinger looked as tired and as anxious as Vaslav felt.

They'd watched the dawn seep out of the east together. Metzinger and he. But now they had separated, forgetting previous companionship, and would not speak until the contest was over. After all Metzinger was from Podujevo. He had his own city to support in the coming battle. Tomorrow they'd exchange tales of their adventures, but for today they must behave as if they didn't know each other, not even to exchange a smile. For today they had to be utterly partisan, caring only for the victory of their own city over the opposition.

Now the first leg of Popolac was erected, to the mutual satisfaction of Metzinger and Vaslav. All the safety checks had been meticulously made, and the leg left the square, its shadow falling hugely across the face of the Town Hall.

Vaslav sipped his sweet, sweet coffee and allowed himself a little grunt of satisfaction. Such days, such days. Days filled with glory, with snapping flags and high, stomach-turning sights, enough to last a man a lifetime. It was a golden foretaste of Heaven.

Let America have its simple pleasures, its cartoon mice, its candy-coated castles, its cults and its technologies, he wanted none of it. The greatest wonder of the world was here, hidden in the hills.

Ah, such days.

In the main square of Podujevo the scene was no less animated, and no less inspiring. Perhaps there was a muted sense of sadness underlying this year's celebration, but that was understandable. Nita Obrenovic, Podujevo's loved and respected organizer, was no longer living. The previous winter had claimed her at the age of ninety-four, leaving the city bereft of her fierce opinions and her fiercer proportions. For sixty years Nita had worked with the citizens of Podujevo, always planning for the next contest and improving on the designs, her energies spent on making the next creation more ambitious and more lifelike than the last.

Now she was dead, and sorely missed. There was no disorganization in the streets without her, the people were far too disciplined for that, but they were already falling behind schedule, and it was almost seven-twenty-five. Nita's daughter had taken over in her mother's stead, but she lacked Nita's power to galvanize the people into action. She was, in a word, too gentle for the job at hand. It required a leader who was part prophet and part ringmaster, to coax and bully and inspire the citizens into their places. Maybe, after two or three decades, and with a few more contests under her belt, Nita Obrenovic's daughter would make the grade. But for today Podujevo was behindhand; safety-checks were being overlooked; nervous looks replaced the confidence of earlier years.

Nevertheless, at six minutes before eight the first limb of Podujevo made its way out of the city to the assembly point, to wait for its fellow.

By that time the flanks were already lashed together in Popolac, and armed contingents were awaiting orders in the Town Square.

Mick woke promptly at seven, though there was no alarm clock in their simply furnished room at the Hotel Beograd. He lay in his bed and listened to Judd's regular breathing from the twin bed across the room. A dull morning light whimpered through the thin curtains, not encouraging an early departure. After a few minutes' staring at the cracked paintwork on the ceiling, and a while longer at the crudely carved crucifix on the opposite wall, Mick got up and went to the window. It was a dull day, as he had guessed. The sky was overcast, and the roofs of Novi

Pazar were grey and featureless in the flat morning light. But beyond the roofs, to the east, he could see the hills. There was sun there. He could see shafts of light catching the blue-green of the forest, inviting a visit to their slopes.

Today maybe they would go south to Kosovska Mitrovica. There was a market there, wasn't there, and a museum? And they could drive down the valley of the Ibar, following the road beside the river, where the hills rose wild and shining on either side. The hills, yes; today he decided they would see the hills.

It was eight-fifteen.

By nine the main bodies of Popolac and Podujevo were substantially assembled. In their allotted districts the limbs of both cities were ready and waiting to join their expectant torsos.

Vaslav Jelovsek capped his gloved hands over his eyes and surveyed the sky. The cloud-base had risen in the last hour, no doubt of it, and there were breaks in the clouds to the west; even, on occasion, a few glimpses of the sun. It wouldn't be a perfect day for the contest perhaps, but certainly adequate.

Mick and Judd breakfasted late on hemendeks – roughly translated as ham and eggs – and several cups of good black coffee. It was brightening up, even in Novi Pazar, and their ambitions were set high. Kosovska Mitrovica by lunchtime, and maybe a visit to the hill-castle of Zvecan in the afternoon.

About nine-thirty they motored out of Novi Pazar and took the Srbovac road south to the Ibar valley. Not a good road, but the bumps and potholes couldn't spoil the new day.

The road was empty, except for the occasional pedestrian; and in place of the maize and corn fields they'd passed on the previous day the road was flanked by undulating hills, whose sides were thickly and darkly forested. Apart from a few birds, they saw no wildlife. Even their infrequent travelling companions petered out altogether after a few miles, and the occasional farmhouse they drove by appeared locked and shuttered up. Black pigs ran unattended in the yard, with no child to

feed them. Washing snapped and billowed on a sagging line, with no washer-woman in sight.

At first this solitary journey through the hills was refreshing in its lack of human contact, but as the morning drew on, an uneasiness grew on them.

"Shouldn't we have seen a signpost to Mitrovica, Mick?"

He peered at the map.

"Maybe…"

"– we've taken the wrong road."

"If there'd been a sign, I'd have seen it. I think we should try and get off this road, bear south a bit more – meet the valley closer to Mitrovica than we'd planned."

"How do we get off this bloody road?"

"There've been a couple of turnings…"

"Dirt-tracks."

"Well it's either that or going on the way we are." Judd pursed his lips.

"Cigarette?" he asked.

"Finished them miles back."

In front of them, the hills formed an impenetrable line. There was no sign of life ahead; no frail wisp of chimney smoke, no sound of voice or vehicle.

"All right," said Judd, "we take the next turning. Anything's better than this."

They drove on. The road was deteriorating rapidly, the potholes becoming craters, the hummocks feeling like bodies beneath the wheels.

Then:

"There!"

A turning: a palpable turning. Not a major road, certainly. In fact barely the dirt-track Judd had described the other roads as being, but it was an escape from the endless perspective of the road they were trapped on.

"This is becoming a bloody safari," said Judd as the VW began to bump and grind its way along the doleful little track.

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I forgot to pack it."

They were beginning to climb now, as the track wound its way up into the hills. The forest closed over them, blotting out the sky, so a shifting patchwork of light and shadow scooted over the bonnet as they drove. There was birdsong suddenly, vacuous and optimistic, and a smell of new pine and undug earth. A fox crossed the track, up ahead, and watched a long moment as the car grumbled up towards it. Then, with the leisurely stride of a fearless prince, it sauntered away into the trees.

Wherever they were going, Mick thought, this was better than the road they'd left. Soon maybe they'd stop, and walk a while, to find a promontory from which they could see the valley, even Novi Pazar, nestled behind them.

The two men were still an hour's drive from Popolac when the head of the contingent at last marched out of the Town Square and took up its position with the main body.

This last exit left the city completely deserted. Not even the sick or the old were neglected on this day; no one was to be denied the spectacle and the triumph of the contest. Every single citizen, however young or infirm, the blind, the crippled, babes in arms, pregnant women – all made their way up from their proud city to the stamping ground. It was the law that they should attend: but it needed no enforcing. No citizen of either city would have missed the chance to see that sight – to experience the thrill of that contest.

The confrontation had to be total, city against city. This was the way it had always been.

So the cities went up into the hills. By noon they were gathered, the citizens of Popolac and Podujevo, in the secret well of the hills, hidden from civilized eyes, to do ancient and ceremonial battle.

Tens of thousands of hearts beat faster. Tens of thousands of bodies stretched and strained and sweated as the twin cities took their positions. The shadows of the bodies darkened tracts of land the size of small towns; the weight of their feet trampled the grass to a green milk;

their movement killed animals, crushed bushes and threw down trees. The earth literally reverberated with their passage, the hills echoing with the booming din of their steps.

In the towering body of Podujevo, a few technical hitches were becoming apparent. A slight flaw in the knitting of the left flank had resulted in a weakness there: and there were consequent problems in the swivelling mechanism of the hips. It was stiffer than it should be, and the movements were not smooth. As a result there was considerable strain being put upon that region of the city. It was being dealt with bravely; after all, the contest was intended to press the contestants to their limits. But breaking point was closer than anyone would have dared to admit. The citizens were not as resilient as they had been in previous contests. A bad decade for crops had produced bodies less well-nourished, spines less supple, wills less resolute. The badly knitted flank might not have caused an accident in itself, but further weakened by the frailty of the competitors it set a scene for death on an unprecedented scale.

They stopped the car.

"Hear that?"

Mick shook his head. His hearing hadn't been good since he was an adolescent. Too many rock shows had blown his eardrums to hell.

Judd got out of the car.

The birds were quieter now. The noise he'd heard as they drove came again. It wasn't simply a noise: it was almost a motion in the earth, a roar that seemed seated in the substance of the hills.

Thunder, was it?

No, too rhythmical. It came again, through the soles of the feet –

Boom.

Mick heard it this time. He leaned out of the car window.

"It's up ahead somewhere. I hear it now."

Judd nodded.

Boom.

The earth-thunder sounded again.

"What the hell is it?" said Mick.

"Whatever it is, I want to see it – "

Judd got back into the Volkswagen, smiling.

"Sounds almost like guns," he said, starting the car. "Big guns."

Through his Russian-made binoculars Vaslav Jelovsek watched the starting-official raise his pistol. He saw the feather of white smoke rise from the barrel, and a second later heard the sound of the shot across the valley.

The contest had begun.

He looked up at the twin towers of Popolac and Podujevo. Heads in the clouds – well almost. They practically stretched to touch the sky. It was an awesome sight, a breath-stopping, sleep-stabbing sight. Two cities swaying and writhing and preparing to take their first steps towards each other in this ritual battle.

Of the two, Podujevo seemed the less stable. There was a slight hesitation as the city raised its left leg to begin its march. Nothing serious, just a little difficulty in coordinating hip and thigh muscles. A couple of steps and the city would find its rhythm; a couple more and its inhabitants would be moving as one creature, one perfect giant set to match its grace and power against its mirror-image.

The gunshot had sent flurries of birds up from the trees that banked the hidden valley. They rose up in celebration of the great contest, chattering their excitement as they swooped over the stamping-ground.

"Did you hear a shot?" asked Judd.

Mick nodded.

"Military exercises…?" Judd's smile had broadened. He could see the headlines already – exclusive reports of secret maneuvers in the depths of the Yugoslavian countryside. Russian tanks perhaps, tactical exercises being held out of the West's prying sight. With luck, he would be the carrier of this news.

Boom.

Boom.

There were birds in the air. The thunder was louder now.

It did sound like guns.

"It's over the next ridge…" said Judd.

"I don't think we should go any further."

"I have to see."

"I don't. We're not supposed to be here."

"I don't see any signs."

"They'll cart us away; deport us – I don't know – I just think – "

Boom.

"I've got to see."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the screaming started.

Podujevo was screaming: a death-cry. Someone buried in the weak flank had died of the strain, and had begun a chain of decay in the system. One man loosed his neighbor and that neighbor loosed his, spreading a cancer of chaos through the body of the city. The coherence of the towering structure deteriorated with terrifying rapidity as the failure of one part of the anatomy put unendurable pressure on the other.

The masterpiece that the good citizens of Podujevo had constructed of their own flesh and blood tottered and then – a dynamited skyscraper, it began to fall.

The broken flank spewed citizens like a slashed artery spitting blood. Then, with a graceful sloth that made the agonies of the citizens all the more horrible, it bowed towards the earth, all its limbs dissembling as it fell.

The huge head, that had brushed the clouds so recently, was flung back on its thick neck. Ten thousand mouths spoke a single scream for its vast mouth, a wordless, infinitely pitiable appeal to the sky. A howl of loss, a howl of anticipation, a howl of puzzlement. How, that scream demanded, could the day of days end like this, in a welter of falling bodies?

"Did you hear that?"

It was unmistakably human, though almost deafeningly loud. Judd's stomach convulsed. He looked across at Mick, who was as white as a sheet.

Judd stopped the car.

"No," said Mick.

"Listen – for Christ's sake – "

The din of dying moans, appeals and imprecations flooded the air. It was very close.

"We've got to go on now," Mick implored.

Judd shook his head. He was prepared for some military spectacle – all the Russian army massed over the next hill – but that noise in his ears was the noise of human flesh – too human for words. It reminded him of his childhood imaginings of Hell; the endless, unspeakable torments his mother had threatened him with if he failed to embrace Christ. It was a terror he'd forgotten for twenty years. But suddenly, here it was again, freshfaced. Maybe the pit itself gaped just over the next horizon, with his mother standing at its lip, inviting him to taste its punishments.

"If you won't drive, I will."

Mick got out of the car and crossed in front of it, glancing up the track as he did so. There was a moment's hesitation, no more than a moment's, when his eyes flickered with disbelief, before he turned towards the windscreen, his face even paler than it had been previously and said: "Jesus Christ…" in a voice that was thick with suppressed nausea.

His lover was still sitting behind the wheel, his head in his hands, trying to blot out memories.

"Judd…"

Judd looked up, slowly. Mick was staring at him like a wildman, his face shining with a sudden, icy sweat. Judd looked past him. A few meters ahead the track had mysteriously darkened, as a tide edged towards the car, a thick, deep tide of blood. Judd's reason twisted and turned to make any other sense of the sight than that inevitable conclusion. But there was no saner explanation. It was blood, in unendurable abundance, blood without end –

And now, in the breeze, there was the flavor of freshly-opened carcasses: the smell out of the depths of the human body, part sweet, part savory.

Mick stumbled back to the passenger's side of the VW and fumbled weakly at the handle. The door opened suddenly and he lurched inside, his eyes glazed.

"Back up," he said.

Judd reached for the ignition. The tide of blood was already sloshing against the front wheels. Ahead, the world had been painted red.

"Drive, for fuck's sake, drive!"

Judd was making no attempt to start the car.

"We must look," he said, without conviction, "we have to."

"We don't have to do anything," said Mick, "but get the hell out of here. It's not our business…"

"Plane crash – "

"There's no smoke."

"Those are human voices."

Mick's instinct was to leave well enough alone. He could read about the tragedy in a newspaper – he could see the pictures tomorrow when they were grey and grainy. Today it was too fresh, too unpredictable –

Anything could be at the end of that track, bleeding –

"We must – "

Judd started the car, while beside him Mick began to moan quietly. The VW began to edge forward, nosing through the river of blood, its wheels spinning in the queasy, foaming tide.

"No," said Mick, very quietly, "please, no…"

"We must," was Judd's reply. "We must. We must."

Only a few yards away the surviving city of Popolac was recovering from its first convulsions. It stared, with a thousand eyes, at the ruins of its ritual enemy, now spread in a tangle of rope and bodies over the impacted ground, shattered forever. Popolac staggered back from the sight, its vast legs flattening the forest that bounded the stamping-ground, its arms flailing the air. But it kept its balance, even as a common insanity, woken by the horror at its feet, surged through its sinews and curdled its brain. The order went out: the body thrashed and twisted and turned from the grisly carpet of Podujevo, and fled into the hills.

As it headed into oblivion, its towering form passed between the

car and the sun, throwing its cold shadow over the bloody road. Mick saw nothing through his tears, and Judd, his eyes narrowed against the sight he feared seeing around the next bend, only dimly registered that something had blotted the light for a minute. A cloud, perhaps. A flock of birds.

Had he looked up at that moment, just stolen a glance out towards the northeast, he would have seen Popolac's head, the vast, swarming head of a maddened city, disappearing below his line of vision, as it marched into the hills. He would have known that this territory was beyond his comprehension; and that there was no healing to be done in this corner of Hell. But he didn't see the city, and he and Mick's last turning-point had passed. From now on, like Popolac and its dead twin, they were lost to sanity, and to all hope of life.

They rounded the bend, and the ruins of Podujevo came into sight.

Their domesticated imaginations had never conceived of a sight so unspeakably brutal.

Perhaps in the battlefields of Europe as many corpses had been heaped together: but had so many of them been women and children, locked together with the corpses of men? There had been piles of dead as high, but ever so many so recently abundant with life? There had been cities laid waste as quickly, but ever an entire city lost to the simple dictate of gravity?

It was a sight beyond sickness. In the face of it the mind slowed to a snail's pace, the forces of reason picked over the evidence with meticulous hands, searching for a flaw in it, a place where it could say:

This is not happening. This is a dream of death, not death itself.

But reason could find no weakness in the wall. This was true. It was death indeed.

Podujevo had fallen.

Thirty-eight thousand, seven hundred and sixty-five citizens were spread on the ground, or rather flung in ungainly, seeping piles. Those who had not died of the fall, or of suffocation, were dying. There would be no survivors from that city except that bundle of onlookers that had traipsed out of their homes to watch the contest. Those few Podujevians,

the crippled, the sick, the ancient few, were now staring, like Mick and Judd, at the carnage, trying not to believe.

Judd was first out of the car. The ground beneath his suedes was sticky with coagulating gore. He surveyed the carnage. There was no wreckage: no sign of a plane crash, no fire, no smell of fuel. Just tens of thousands of fresh bodies, all either naked or dressed in an identical grey serge, men, women and children alike. Some of them, he could see, wore leather harnesses, tightly buckled around their upper chests, and snaking out from these contraptions were lengths of rope, miles and miles of it. The closer he looked, the more he saw of the extraordinary system of knots and lashings that still held the bodies together. For some reason these people had been tied together, side by side. Some were yoked on their neighbors' shoulders, straddling them like boys playing at horseback riding. Others were locked arm in arm, knitted together with threads of rope in a wall of muscle and bone. Yet others were trussed in a ball, with their heads tucked between their knees. All were in some way connected up with their fellows, tied together as though in some insane collective bondage game.

Another shot.

Mick looked up.

Across the field a solitary man, dressed in a drab overcoat, was walking amongst the bodies with a revolver, dispatching the dying. It was a pitifully inadequate act of mercy, but he went on nevertheless, choosing the suffering children first. Emptying the revolver, filling it again, emptying it, filling it, emptying it –

Mick let go.

He yelled at the top of his voice over the moans of the injured.

"What is this?"

The man looked up from his appalling duty, his face as deadgrey as his coat.

"Uh?" he grunted, frowning at the two interlopers through his thick spectacles.

"What's happened here?" Mick shouted across at him. It felt good to shout, it felt good to sound angry at the man. Maybe he was to blame. It would be a fine thing, just to have someone to blame.

"Tell us –" Mick said. He could hear the tears throbbing in his voice. "Tell us, for God's sake. Explain."

Grey-coat shook his head. He didn't understand a word this young idiot was saying. It was English he spoke, but that's all he knew. Mick began to walk towards him, feeling all the time the eyes of the dead on him. Eyes like black, shining gems set in broken faces: eyes looking at him upside down, on heads severed from their seating. Eyes in heads that had solid howls for voices. Eyes in heads beyond howls, beyond breath.

Thousands of eyes.

He reached Grey-coat, whose gun was almost empty. He had taken off his spectacles and thrown them aside. He too was weeping, little jerks ran through his big, ungainly body.

At Mick's feet, somebody was reaching for him. He didn't want to look, but the hand touched his shoe and he had no choice but to see its owner. A young man, lying like a flesh swastika, every joint smashed. A child lay under him, her bloody legs poking out like two pink sticks.

He wanted the man's revolver, to stop the hand from touching him. Better still he wanted a machine-gun, a flame-thrower, anything to wipe the agony away.

As he looked up from the broken body, Mick saw Grey-coat raise the revolver.

"Judd –" he said, but as the word left his lips the muzzle of the revolver was slipped into Grey-coat's mouth and the trigger was pulled.

Grey-coat had saved the last bullet for himself. The back of his head opened like a dropped egg, the shell of his skull flying off. His body went limp and sank to the ground, the revolver still between his lips.

"We must –" began Mick, saying the words to nobody. "We must…"

What was the imperative? In this situation, what *must* they do?

"We must –"

Judd was behind him.

"Help –" he said to Mick.

"Yes. We must get help. We must –"

"Go."

Go! That was what they must do. On any pretext, for any fragile, cow-

ardly reason, they must go. Get out of the battlefield, get out of the reach of a dying hand with a wound in place of a body.

"We have to tell the authorities. Find a town. Get help –"

"Priests," said Mick. "They need priests."

It was absurd, to think of giving the Last Rites to so many people. It would take an army of priests, a water cannon filled with holy water, a loudspeaker to pronounce the benedictions.

They turned away, together, from the horror, and wrapped their arms around each other, then picked their way through the carnage to the car.

It was occupied.

Vaslav Jelovsek was sitting behind the wheel, and trying to start the Volkswagen. He turned the ignition key once. Twice. Third time the engine caught and the wheels spun in the crimson mud as he put her into reverse and backed down the track. Vaslav saw the Englishmen running towards the car, cursing him. There was no help for it – he didn't want to steal the vehicle, but he had work to do. He had been a referee, he had been responsible for the contest, and the safety of the contestants. One of the heroic cities had already fallen. He must do everything in his power to prevent Popolac from following its twin. He must chase Popolac, and reason with it. Talk it down out of its terrors with quiet words and promises. If he failed there would be another disaster the equal of the one in front of him, and his conscience was already broken enough.

Mick was still chasing the VW, shouting at Jelovsek. The thief took no notice, concentrating on maneuvering the car back down the narrow, slippery track. Mick was losing the chase rapidly. The car had begun to pick up speed. Furious, but without the breath to speak his fury, Mick stood in the road, hands on his knees, heaving and sobbing.

"Bastard!" said Judd.

Mick looked down the track. Their car had already disappeared.

"Fucker couldn't even drive properly."

"We have…we have…to catch…up…" said Mick through gulps of breath.

"How?"

"On foot…"

"We haven't even got a map…it's in the car."

"Jesus…Christ…Almighty."

They walked down the track together, away from the field.

After a few meters the tide of blood began to peter out. Just a few congealing rivulets dribbled on towards the main road. Mick and Judd followed the bloody tiremarks to the junction.

The Srbovac road was empty in both directions. The tiremarks showed a left turn. "He's gone deeper into the hills," said Judd, staring along the lovely road towards the blue-green distance. "He's out of his mind!"

"Do we go back the way we came?"

"It'll take us all night on foot."

"We'll hop a lift."

Judd shook his head: his face was slack and his look lost. "Don't you see, Mick, they all knew this was happening. The people in the farms – they got the hell out while those people went crazy up there. There'll be no cars along this road, I'll lay you anything – except maybe a couple of shit-dumb tourists like us – and no tourist would stop for the likes of us."

He was right. They looked like butchers – splattered with blood. Their faces were shining with grease, their eyes maddened.

"We'll have to walk," said Judd, "the way he went."

He pointed along the road. The hills were darker now; the sun had suddenly gone out on their slopes.

Mick shrugged. Either way he could see they had a night on the road ahead of them. But he wanted to walk somewhere – anywhere – as long as he put distance between him and the dead.

In Popolac a kind of peace reigned. Instead of a frenzy of panic, there was a numbness, a sheep-like acceptance of the world as it was. Locked in their positions, strapped, roped and harnessed to each other in a living system that allowed for no single voice to be louder than any other, nor any back to labor less than its neighbor's, they let an insane consensus replace the tranquil voice of reason. They were convulsed

into one mind, one thought, one ambition. They became, in the space of a few moments, the single-minded giant whose image they had so brilliantly re-created. The illusion of petty individuality was swept away in an irresistible tide of collective feeling – not a mob's passion, but a telepathic surge that dissolved the voices of thousands into one irresistible command.

And the voice said: Go!

The voice said: take this horrible sight away, where I need never see it again.

Popolac turned away into the hills, its legs taking strides half a mile long. Each man, woman and child in that seething tower was sightless. They saw only through the eyes of the city. They were thoughtless, but to think the city's thoughts. And they believed themselves deathless, in their lumbering, relentless strength. Vast and mad and deathless.

Two miles along the road Mick and Judd smelt petrol in the air, and a little further along they came upon the VW. It had overturned in the reed-clogged drainage ditch at the side of the road. It had not caught fire.

The driver's door was open, and the body of Vaslav Jelovsek had tumbled out. His face was calm in unconsciousness. There seemed to be no sign of injury, except for a small cut or two on his sober face. They gently pulled the thief out of the wreckage and up out of the filth of the ditch on to the road. He moaned a little as they fussed about him, rolling Mick's sweater up to pillow his head and removing the man's jacket and tie.

Quite suddenly, he opened his eyes.

He stared at them both.

"Are you all right?" Mick asked.

The man said nothing for a moment. He seemed not to understand.

Then:

"English?" he said. His accent was thick, but the question was quite clear.

"Yes."

"I heard your voices. English."

He frowned and winced.

"Are you in pain?" said Judd.

The man seemed to find this amusing.

"Am I in pain?" he repeated, his face screwed up in a mixture of agony and delight.

"I shall die," he said, through gritted teeth.

"No," said Mick. "You're all right –"

The man shook his head, his authority absolute.

"I shall die," he said again, the voice full of determination, "I want to die."

Judd crouched closer to him. His voice was weaker by the moment.

"Tell us what to do," he said. The man had closed his eyes. Judd shook him awake, roughly.

"Tell us," he said again, his show of compassion rapidly disappearing. "Tell us what this is all about."

"About?" said the man, his eyes still closed. "It was a fall, that's all. Just a fall..."

"What fell?"

"The city. Podujevo. My city."

"What did it fall from?"

"Itself, of course."

The man was explaining nothing; just answering one riddle with another.

"Where were you going?" Mick inquired, trying to sound as unaggressive as possible.

"After Popolac," said the man.

"Popolac?" said Judd.

Mick began to see some sense in the story.

"Popolac is another city. Like Podujevo. Twin cities. They're on the map –"

"Where's the city now?" said Judd.

Vaslav Jelovsek seemed to choose to tell the truth. There was a moment when he hovered between dying with a riddle on his lips, and living long enough to unburden his story. What did it matter if the tale was told now? There could never be another contest: all that was over.

"They came to fight," he said, his voice now very soft, "Popolac and Podujevo. They come every ten years –"

"Fight?" said Judd. "You mean all those people were slaughtered?"

Vaslav shook his head.

"No, no. They fell. I told you."

"Well how do they fight?" Mick said.

"Go into the hills," was the only reply.

Vaslav opened his eyes a little. The faces that loomed over him were exhausted and sick. They had suffered, these innocents. They deserved some explanation.

"As giants," he said. "They fought as giants. They made a body out of their bodies, do you understand? The frame, the muscles, the bone, the eyes, nose, teeth all made of men and women."

"He's delirious," said Judd.

"You go into the hills," the man repeated. "See for yourselves how true it is."

"Even supposing –" Mick began.

Vaslav interrupted him, eager to be finished. "They were good at the game of giants. It took many centuries of practice: every ten years making the figure larger and larger. One always ambitious to be larger than the other. Ropes to tie them all together, flawlessly. Sinews…ligaments… There was food in its belly…there were pipes from the loins, to take away the waste. The best-sighted sat in the eye-sockets, the best voiced in the mouth and throat. You wouldn't believe the engineering of it."

"I don't," said Judd, and stood up.

"It is the body of the state," said Vaslav, so softly his voice was barely above a whisper, "it is the shape of our lives."

There was a silence. Small clouds passed over the road, soundlessly shedding their mass to the air.

"It was a miracle," he said. It was as if he realized the true enormity of the fact for the first time. "It was a miracle."

It was enough. Yes. It was quite enough.

His mouth closed, the words said, and he died.

Mick felt this death more acutely than the thousands they had fled

from; or rather this death was the key to unlock the anguish he felt for them all.

Whether the man had chosen to tell a fantastic lie as he died, or whether this story was in some way true, Mick felt useless in the face of it. His imagination was too narrow to encompass the idea. His brain ached with the thought of it, and his compassion cracked under the weight of misery he felt.

They stood on the road, while the clouds scudded by, their vague, grey shadows passing over them towards the enigmatic hills.

It was twilight.

Popolac could stride no further. It felt exhaustion in every muscle. Here and there in its huge anatomy deaths had occurred; but there was no grieving in the city for its deceased cells. If the dead were in the interior, the corpses were allowed to hang from their harnesses. If they formed the skin of the city they were unbuckled from their positions and released, to plunge into the forest below.

The giant was not capable of pity. It had no ambition but to continue until it ceased.

As the sun slunk out of sight Popolac rested, sitting on a small hillock, nursing its huge head in its huge hands.

The stars were coming out, with their familiar caution. Night was approaching, mercifully bandaging up the wounds of the day, blinding eyes that had seen too much.

Popolac rose to its feet again, and began to move, step by booming step. It would not be long surely, before fatigue overcame it: before it could lie down in the tomb of some lost valley and die.

But for a space yet it must walk on, each step more agonizingly slow than the last, while the night bloomed black around its head.

Mick wanted to bury the car thief, somewhere on the edge of the forest. Judd, however, pointed out that burying a body might seem in tomorrow's saner light, a little suspicious. And besides, wasn't it absurd to concern themselves with one corpse when there were literally thousands of them lying a few miles from where they stood?

The body was left to lie, therefore, and the car to sink deeper into the ditch.

They began to walk again.

It was cold, and colder by the moment, and they were hungry. But the few houses they passed were all deserted, locked and shuttered, every one.

"What did he mean?" said Mick, as they stood looking at another locked door.

"He was talking metaphor – "

"All that stuff about giants?"

"It was some Trotskyist tripe – " Judd insisted.

"I don't think so."

"I know so. It was his deathbed speech, he'd probably been preparing for years."

"I don't think so," Mick said again, and began walking back towards the road.

"Oh, how's that?" Judd was at his back.

"He wasn't toeing some party line."

"Are you saying you think there's some giant around here someplace? For God's sake!"

Mick turned to Judd. His face was difficult to see in the twilight. But his voice was sober with belief.

"Yes. I think he was telling the truth."

"That's absurd. That's ridiculous. No."

Judd hated Mick that moment. Hated his naïveté, his passion to believe any half-witted story if it had a whiff of romance about it. And this? This was the worst, the most preposterous…

"No," he said again. "No. No. No."

The sky was porcelain smooth, and the outline of the hills black as pitch.

"I'm fucking freezing," said Mick out of the ink. "Are you staying here or walking with me?"

Judd shouted: "We're not going to find anything this way."

"Well it's a long way back."

"We're just going deeper into the hills."

"Do what you like – I'm walking."

His footsteps receded: the dark encased him.

After a minute, Judd followed.

The night was cloudless and bitter. They walked on, their collars up against the chill, their feet swollen in their shoes. Above them the whole sky had become a parade of stars. A triumph of spilled light, from which the eye could make as many patterns as it had patience for. After a while, they slung their tired arms around each other, for comfort and warmth.

About eleven o'clock, they saw the glow of a window in the distance.

The woman at the door of the stone cottage didn't smile, but she understood their condition, and let them in. There seemed to be no purpose in trying to explain to either the woman or her crippled husband what they had seen. The cottage had no telephone, and there was no sign of a vehicle, so even had they found some way to express themselves, nothing could be done.

With mimes and face-pullings they explained that they were hungry and exhausted. They tried further to explain that they were lost, cursing themselves for leaving their phrasebook in the VW. She didn't seem to understand very much of what they said, but sat them down beside a blazing fire and put a pan of food on the stove to heat.

They ate thick unsalted pea soup and eggs, and occasionally smiled their thanks at the woman. Her husband sat beside the fire, making no attempt to talk, or even to look at the visitors.

The food was good. It buoyed their spirits.

They would sleep until morning and then begin the long trek back. By dawn the bodies in the field would be being quantified, identified, parcelled up and dispatched to their families. The air would be full of reassuring noises, cancelling out the moans that still rang in their ears. There would be helicopters, lorry loads of men organizing the clearing-up operations. All the rites and paraphernalia of a civilized disaster.

And in a while, it would be palatable. It would become part of their history: a tragedy, of course, but one they could explain, classify and learn to live with. All would be well, yes, all would be well. Come morning.

The sleep of sheer fatigue came on them suddenly. They lay where they had fallen, still sitting at the table, their heads on their crossed arms. A litter of empty bowls and bread crusts surrounded them.

They knew nothing. Dreamt nothing. Felt nothing.

Then the thunder began.

In the earth, in the deep earth, a rhythmical tread, as of a titan, that came, by degrees, closer and closer.

The woman woke her husband. She blew out the lamp and went to the door. The night sky was luminous with stars: the hills black on every side.

The thunder still sounded: a full half-minute between every boom, but louder now. And louder with every new step.

They stood at the door together, husband and wife, and listened to the night-hills echo back and forth with the sound. There was no lightning to accompany the thunder.

Just the boom –

Boom –

Boom –

It made the ground shake: it threw dust down from the door-lintel, and rattled the window-latches.

Boom –

Boom –

They didn't know what approached, but whatever shape it took, and whatever it intended, there seemed no sense in running from it. Where they stood, in the pitiful shelter of their cottage, was as safe as any nook of the forest. How could they choose, out of a hundred thousand trees, which would be standing when the thunder had passed? Better to wait: and watch.

The wife's eyes were not good, and she doubted what she saw when the blackness of the hill changed shape and reared up to block the stars. But her husband had seen it too: the unimaginably huge head, vaster in the deceiving darkness, looming up and up, dwarfing the hills themselves with ambition.

He fell to his knees, babbling a prayer, his arthritic legs twisted beneath him.

His wife screamed: no words she knew could keep this monster at bay – no prayer, no plea, had power over it.

In the cottage, Mick woke and his outstretched arm, twitching with a sudden cramp, wiped the plate and the lamp off the table.

They smashed.

Judd woke.

The screaming outside had stopped. The woman had disappeared from the doorway into the forest. Any tree, any tree at all, was better than this sight. Her husband still let a string of prayers dribble from his slack mouth, as the great leg of the giant rose to take another step –

Boom –

The cottage shook. Plates danced and smashed off the dresser. A clay pipe rolled from the mantelpiece and shattered in the ashes of the hearth.

The lovers knew the noise that sounded in their substance: that earth-thunder.

Mick reached for Judd, and took him by the shoulder.

"You see," he said, his teeth blue-grey in the darkness of the cottage. "See? See?"

There was a kind of hysteria bubbling behind his words. He ran to the door, stumbling over a chair in the dark. Cursing and bruised he staggered out into the night –

Boom –

The thunder was deafening. This time it broke all the windows in the cottage. In the bedroom one of the roof-joists cracked and flung debris downstairs.

Judd joined his lover at the door. The old man was now face down on the ground, his sick and swollen fingers curled, his begging lips pressed to the damp soil.

Mick was looking up, towards the sky. Judd followed his gaze.

There was a place that showed no stars. It was a darkness in the shape of a man, a vast, broad human frame, a colossus that soared up to meet heaven. It was not quite a perfect giant. Its outline was not tidy; it seethed and swarmed.

He seemed broader too, this giant, than any real man. His legs were

abnormally thick and stumpy, and his arms were not long. The hands, as they clenched and unclenched, seemed oddly jointed and over-delicate for its torso.

Then it raised one huge, flat foot and placed it on the earth, taking a stride towards them.

Boom –

The step brought the roof collapsing in on the cottage. Everything that the car-thief had said was true. Popolac was a city and a giant; and it had gone into the hills…

Now their eyes were becoming accustomed to the night light. They could see in ever more horrible detail the way this monster was constructed. It was a masterpiece of human engineering: a man made entirely of men. Or rather, a sexless giant, made of men and women and children. All the citizens of Popolac writhed and strained in the body of this flesh-knitted giant, their muscles stretched to breaking point, their bones close to snapping.

They could see how the architects of Popolac had subtly altered the proportions of the human body; how the thing had been made squatter to lower its center of gravity; how its legs had been made elephantine to bear the weight of the torso; how the head was sunk low on to the wide shoulders, so that the problems of a weak neck had been minimized.

Despite these malformations, it was horribly lifelike. The bodies that were bound together to make its surface were naked but for their harnesses, so that its surface glistened in the starlight, like one vast human torso. Even the muscles were well copied, though simplified. They could see the way the roped bodies pushed and pulled against each other in solid cords of flesh and bone. They could see the intertwined people that made up the body: the backs like turtles packed together to offer the sweep of the pectorals; the lashed and knotted acrobats at the joints of the arms and the legs alike; rolling and unwinding to articulate the city.

But surely the most amazing sight of all was the face.

Cheeks of bodies; cavernous eye-sockets in which heads stared, five bound together for each eyeball; a broad, flat nose and a mouth that opened and closed, as the muscles of the jaw bunched and hollowed

rhythmically. And from that mouth, lined with teeth of bald children, the voice of the giant, now only a weak copy of its former powers, spoke a single note of idiot music.

Popolac walked and Popolac sang.

Was there ever a sight in Europe the equal of it?

They watched, Mick and Judd, as it took another step towards them.

The old man had wet his pants. Blubbering and begging, he dragged himself away from the ruined cottage into the surrounding trees, dragging his dead legs after him.

The Englishmen remained where they stood, watching the spectacle as it approached. Neither dread nor horror touched them now, just an awe that rooted them to the spot. They knew this was a sight they could never hope to see again; this was the apex – after this there was only common experience. Better to stay then, though every step brought death nearer, better to stay and see the sight while it was still there to be seen. And if it killed them, this monster, then at least they would have glimpsed a miracle, known this terrible majesty for a brief moment. It seemed a fair exchange.

Popolac was within two steps of the cottage. They could see the complexities of its structure quite clearly. The faces of the citizens were becoming detailed: white, sweat-wet, and content in their weariness. Some hung dead from their harnesses, their legs swinging back and forth like the hanged. Others, children particularly, had ceased to obey their training, and had relaxed their positions, so that the form of the body was degenerating, beginning to seethe with the boils of rebellious cells.

Yet it still walked, each step an incalculable effort of coordination and strength.

Boom –

The step that trod the cottage came sooner than they thought.

Mick saw the leg raised; saw the faces of the people in the shin and ankle and foot – they were as big as he was now – all huge men chosen to take the full weight of this great creation. Many were dead. The bottom of the foot, he could see, was a jigsaw of crushed and bloody bodies, pressed to death under the weight of their fellow citizens.

The foot descended with a roar.

In a matter of seconds the cottage was reduced to splinters and dust.

Popolac blotted the sky utterly. It was, for a moment, the whole world, heaven and earth, its presence filled the senses to overflowing. At this proximity one look could not encompass it, the eye had to range backwards and forwards over its mass to take it all in, and even then the mind refused to accept the whole truth.

A whirling fragment of stone, flung off from the cottage as it collapsed, struck Judd full in the face. In his head he heard the killing stroke like a ball hitting a wall: a play-yard death. No pain: no remorse. Out like a light, a tiny, insignificant light; his death-cry lost in the pandemonium, his body hidden in the smoke and darkness. Mick neither saw nor heard Judd die.

He was too busy staring at the foot as it settled for a moment in the ruins of the cottage, while the other leg mustered the will to move.

Mick took his chance. Howling like a banshee, he ran towards the leg, longing to embrace the monster. He stumbled in the wreckage, and stood again, bloodied, to reach for the foot before it was lifted and he was left behind. There was a clamor of agonized breath as the message came to the foot that it must move; Mick saw the muscles of the shin bunch and marry as the leg began to lift. He made one last lunge at the limb as it began to leave the ground, snatching a harness or a rope, or human hair, or flesh itself – anything to catch this passing miracle and be part of it. Better to go with it wherever it was going, serve it in its purpose, whatever that might be; better to die with it than live without it.

He caught the foot, and found a safe purchase on its ankle. Screaming his sheer ecstasy at his success he felt the great leg raised, and glanced down through the swirling dust to the spot where he had stood, already receding as the limb climbed.

The earth was gone from beneath him. He was a hitchhiker with a god: the mere life he had left was nothing to him now, or ever. He would live with this thing, yes, he would live with it – seeing it and seeing it and eating it with his eyes until he died of sheer gluttony.

He screamed and howled and swung on the ropes, drinking up his triumph. Below, far below, he glimpsed Judd's body, curled up pale on

the dark ground, irretrievable. Love and life and sanity were gone, gone like the memory of his name, or his sex, or his ambition.

It all meant nothing. Nothing at all.

Boom –

Boom –

Popolac walked, the noise of its steps receding to the east. People walked, the hum of its voice lost in the night.

After a day, birds came, foxes came, flies, butterflies, wasps came. Judd moved, Judd shifted, Judd gave birth. In his belly maggots warmed themselves, in a vixen's den the good flesh of his thigh was fought over. After that, it was quick. The bones yellowing, the bones crumbling: soon, an empty space which he had once filled with breath and onions.

Darkness, light, darkness, light. He interrupted neither with his name.

Crossing into Cambodia

A STORY OF THE THIRD WORLD WAR

MICHAEL MOORCOCK

In homage to Isaac Babel, 1894–1940

1

I APPROACHED and Savitsky, Commander of the Sixth Division, got up. As usual I was impressed by his gigantic, perfect body. Yet he seemed unconscious either of his power or of his elegance. Although not obliged to do so, I almost saluted him. He stretched an arm towards me. I put the papers into his gloved hand. "These were the last messages we received," I said. The loose sleeve of his Cossack cherkesska slipped back to reveal a battle-strengthened forearm, brown and glowing. I compared his skin to my own. For all that I had ridden with the Sixth for five months, I was still pale; still possessed, I thought, of an intellectual's hands. Evening light fell through the jungle foliage and a few parrots shrieked their last goodnight. Mosquitoes were gathering in the shadows, whirling in tight-woven patterns, like a frightened mob. The jungle smelled of rot. Yakovlev, somewhere, began to play a sad accordion tune.

The Vietnamese spy we had caught spoke calmly from the other side of Savitsky's camp table. "I think I should like to be away from here before nightfall. Will you keep your word, sir, if I tell you what I know?"

Savitsky looked back and I saw the prisoner for the first time (though his presence was of course well known to the camp). His wrists and ankles were pinned to the ground with bayonets but he was otherwise unhurt.

Savitsky drew in his breath and continued to study the documents I had brought him. Our radio was now useless. "He seems to be con-

firming what these say." He tapped the second sheet. "An attack tonight."

The temple on the other side of the clearing came to life within. Pale light rippled on greenish, half-ruined stonework. Some of our men must have lit a fire there. I heard noises of delight and some complaints from the women who had been with the spy. One began to shout in that peculiar, irritating high-pitched half-wail they all use when they are trying to appeal to us. For a moment Savitsky and I had a bond in our disgust. I felt flattered. Savitsky made an impatient gesture, as if of embarrassment. He turned his handsome face and looked gravely down at the peasant. "Does it matter to you? You've lost a great deal of blood."

"I do not think I am dying."

Savitsky nodded. He was economical in everything, even his cruelties. He had been prepared to tear the man apart with horses, but he knew that he would tire two already overworked beasts. He picked up his cap from the camp table and put it thoughtfully on his head. From the deserted huts came the smell of our horses as the wind reversed its direction. I drew my borrowed burka about me. I was the only one in our unit to bother to wear it, for I felt the cold as soon as the sun was down.

"Will you show me on the map where they intend to ambush us?"

"Yes," said the peasant. "Then you can send a man to spy on their camp. He will confirm what I say."

I stood to one side while these two professionals conducted their business. Savitsky strode over to the spy and very quickly, like a man plucking a hen, drew the bayonets out and threw them on the ground. With some gentleness, he helped the peasant to his feet and sat him down in the leather campaign chair he had carried with him on our long ride from Danang, where we had disembarked off the troop-ship which had brought us from Vladivostok.

"I'll get some rags to stop him bleeding," I said.

"Good idea," confirmed Savitsky. "We don't want the stuff all over the maps. You'd better be in on this, anyway."

As the liaison officer, it was my duty to know what was happening. That is why I am able to tell this story. My whole inclination was to

return to my billet where two miserable ancients cowered and sang at me whenever I entered or left but where at least I had a small barrier between me and the casual day-to-day terrors of the campaign. But, illiterate and obtuse though these horsemen were, they had accurate instincts and could tell immediately if I betrayed any sign of fear. Perhaps, I thought, it is because they are all so used to disguising their own fears. Yet bravery was a habit with them and I yearned to catch it. I had ridden with them in more than a dozen encounters, helping to drive the Cambodians back into their own country. Each time I had seen men and horses blown to pieces, torn apart, burned alive. I had come to exist on the smell of blood and gunpowder as if it were a substitute for air and food – I identified it with the smell of Life itself – yet I had still failed to achieve that strangely passive sense of inner calm my comrades all, to a greater or lesser degree, displayed. Only in action did they seem possessed in any way by the outer world, although they still worked with efficient ferocity, killing as quickly as possible with lance, sabre or carbine and, with ghastly humanity, never leaving a wounded man of their own or the enemy's without his throat cut or a bullet in his brain. I was thankful that these, my traditional foes, were now allies for I could not have resisted them had they turned against me.

I bound the peasant's slender wrists and ankles. He was like a child. He said, "I knew there were no arteries cut." I nodded at him. "You're the political officer, aren't you?" He spoke almost sympathetically.

"Liaison," I said.

He was satisfied by my reply, as if I had confirmed his opinion. He added: "I suppose it's the leather coat. Almost a uniform."

I smiled. "A sign of class difference, you think?"

His eyes were suddenly drowned with pain and he staggered, but recovered to finish what he had evidently planned to say: "You Russians are natural bourgeoisie. It's not your fault. It's your turn."

Savitsky was too tired to respond with anything more than a small smile. I felt that he agreed with the peasant and that these two excluded me, felt superior to me. I knew anger, then. Tightening the last rag on his left wrist, I made the spy wince. Satisfied that my honour was avenged I cast an eye over the map. "Here we are," I said. We were on the very edge

of Cambodia. A small river, easily forded, formed the border. We had heard it just before we had entered this village. Scouts confirmed that it lay no more than half a verst to the west. The stream on the far side of the village, behind the temple, was a tributary.

"You give your word you won't kill me," said the Vietnamese.

"Yes," said Savitsky. He was beyond joking. We all were. It had been ages since any of us had been anything but direct with one another, save for the conventional jests which were merely part of the general noise of the squadron, like the jangling of harness. And he was beyond lying, except where it was absolutely necessary. His threats were as unqualified as his promises.

"They are here." The spy indicated a town. He began to shiver. He was wearing only torn shorts. "And some of them are here, because they think you might use the bridge rather than the ford."

"And the attacking force for tonight?"

"Based here." A point on our side of the river.

Savitsky shouted. "Pavlichenko."

From the Division Commander's own tent, young Pavlichenko, capless, with ruffled fair hair and a look of restrained disappointment, emerged. "Comrade?"

"Get a horse and ride with this man for half an hour the way we came today. Ride as fast as you can, then leave him and return to camp."

Pavlichenko ran towards the huts where the horses were stabled. Savitsky had believed the spy and was not bothering to check his information. "We can't attack them," he murmured. "We'll have to wait until they come to us. It's better." The flap of Savitsky's tent was now open. I glanced through and to my surprise saw a Eurasian girl of about fourteen. She had her feet in a bucket of water. She smiled at me. I looked away.

Savitsky said, "He's washing her for me. Pavlichenko's an expert."

"My wife and daughters?" said the spy.

"They'll have to remain now. What can I do?" Savitsky shrugged in the direction of the temple. "You should have spoken earlier."

The Vietnamese accepted this and, when Pavlichenko returned with the horse, leading it and running as if he wished to get the job over with

in the fastest possible time, he allowed the young Cossack to lift him onto the saddle.

"Take your rifle," Savitsky told Pavlichenko. "We're expecting an attack."

Pavlichenko dashed for his own tent, the small one close to Savitsky's. The horse, as thoroughly trained as the men who rode him, stood awkwardly but quietly beneath his nervous load. The spy clutched the saddle pommel, the mane, his bare feet angled towards the mount's neck. He stared ahead of him into the night. His wife and daughter had stopped their appalling wailing but I thought I could hear the occasional feminine grunt from the temple. The flames had become more animated. His other daughter, her feet still in the bucket, held her arms tightly under her chest and her curious eyes looked without rancour at her father, then at the Division Commander, then, finally, at me. Savitsky spoke. "You're the intellectual. She doesn't know Russian. Tell her that her father will be safe. She can join him tomorrow."

"My Vietnamese might not be up to that."

"Use English or French, then." He began to tidy his maps, calling over Kreshenko, who was in charge of the guard.

I entered the tent and was shocked by her little smile. She had a peculiar smell to her – like old tea and cooked rice. I knew my Vietnamese was too limited so I asked her if she spoke French. She was of the wrong generation. "Amerikanski," she told me. I relayed Savitsky's message. She said, "So I am the price of the old bastard's freedom."

"Not at all." I reassured her. "He told us what we wanted. It was just bad luck for you that he used you three for cover."

She laughed. "Nuts! It was me got him to do it. With my sister. Tao's boyfriend works for the Cambodians." She added: "They seemed to be winning at the time."

Savitsky entered the tent and zipped it up from the bottom. He used a single, graceful movement. For all that he was bone-weary, he moved with the unconscious fluidity of an acrobat. He lit one of his foul-smelling papyrosi and sat heavily on the camp bed beside the girl.

"She speaks English," I said. "She's a half-caste. Look."

He loosened his collar. "Could you ask her if she's clean, comrade?"

"I doubt it," I said. I repeated what she had told me.

He nodded. "Well, ask her if she'll be a good girl and use her mouth. I just want to get on with it. I expect she does, too."

I relayed the D.C.'s message.

"I'll bite his cock off if I get the chance," said the girl.

Outside in the night the horse began to move away. I explained what she had said.

"I wonder, comrade," Savitsky said, "if you would oblige me by holding the lady's head." He began to undo the belt of his trousers, pulling up his elaborately embroidered shirt.

The girl's feet became noisy in the water and the bucket overturned. In my leather jacket, my burka, with my automatic pistol at her right ear, I restrained the girl until Savitsky had finished with her. He began to take off his boots. "Would you care for her, yourself?"

I shook my head and escorted the girl from the tent. She was walking in that familiar stiff way women have after they have been raped. I asked her if she was hungry. She agreed that she was. I took her to my billet. The old couple found some more rice and I watched her eat it.

Later that night she moved towards me from where she had been lying more or less at my feet. I thought I was being attacked and shot her in the stomach. Knowing what my comrades would think of me if I tried to keep her alive (it would be a matter of hours) I shot her in the head to put her out of her misery. As luck would have it, these shots woke the camp and when the Khmer soldiers attacked a few moments later we were ready for them and killed a great many before the rest ran back into the jungle. Most of these soldiers were younger than the girl.

In the morning, to save any embarrassment, the remaining women were chased out of the camp in the direction taken by the patriarch. The old couple had disappeared and I assumed that they would not return or, if they did, that they would bury the girl, so I left her where I had shot her. A silver ring she wore would compensate them for their trouble. There was very little food remaining in the village, but what there was we ate for our breakfast or packed into our saddle-bags. Then, mounting up, we followed the almost preternaturally handsome Savitsky back into the jungle, heading for the river.

2

When our scout did not return after we had heard a long burst of machine-gun fire, we guessed that he had found at least part of the enemy ambush and that the spy had not lied to us, so we decided to cross the river at a less convenient spot where, with luck, no enemy would be waiting.

The river was swift but had none of the force of Russian rivers and Pavlichenko was sent across with a rope which he tied to a tree-trunk. Then we entered the water and began to swim our horses across. Those who had lost the canvas covers for their carbines kept them high in the air, holding the rope with one hand and guiding their horses with legs and with reins which they gripped in their teeth. I was more or less in the middle, with half the division behind me and half beginning to assemble on dry land on the other side, when Cambodian aircraft sighted us and began an attack dive. The aircraft were in poor repair, borrowed from half-a-dozen other countries, and their guns, aiming equipment and, I suspect, their pilots, were in worse condition, but they killed seven of our men as we let go of the ropes, slipped out of our saddles, and swam beside our horses, making for the far bank, while those still on dry land behind us went to cover where they could. A couple of machine-gun carts were turned on the attacking planes, but these were of little use. The peculiar assortment of weapons used against us – tracers, two rockets, a few napalm canisters which struck the water and sank (only one opened and burned but the mixture was quickly carried off by the current) and then they were flying back to base somewhere in Cambodia's interior – indicated that they had very little conventional armament left. This was true of most of the participants at this stage, which is why our cavalry had proved so effective. But they had bought some time for their ground-troops who were now coming in.

In virtual silence, any shouts drowned by the rushing of the river, we crossed to the enemy bank and set up a defensive position, using the machine-gun carts which were last to come across on ropes. The Cambodians hit us from two sides – moving in from their original ambush positions – but we were able to return their fire effectively, even using the anti-tank weapons and the mortar which, hitherto, we

had tended to consider useless weight. They used arrows, blow-darts, automatic rifles, pistols and a flame-thrower which only worked for a few seconds and did us no harm. The Cossacks were not happy with this sort of warfare and as soon as there was a lull we had mounted up, packed the gear in the carts, and with sabres drawn were howling into the Khmer Stalinists (as we had been instructed to term them). Leaving them scattered and useless, we found a bit of concrete road along which we could gallop for a while. We slowed to a trot and then to a walk. The pavement was potholed and only slightly less dangerous than the jungle floor. The jungle was behind us now and seemed to have been a screen hiding the devastation ahead. The landscape was virtually flat, as if it had been bombed clean of contours, with a few broken buildings, the occasional blackened tree, and ash drifted across the road, coming sometimes up to our horses' knees. The ash was stirred by a light wind. We had witnessed scenes like it before, but never on such a scale. The almost colourless nature of the landscape was emphasised by the unrelieved brilliance of the blue sky overhead. The sun had become very hot.

Once we saw two tanks on the horizon, but they did not challenge us. We continued until early afternoon when we came to the remains of some sort of modern power installation and we made camp in the shelter of its walls. The ash got into our food and we drank more of our water than was sensible. We were all covered in the grey stuff by this time.

"We're like corpses," said Savitsky. He resembled a heroic statue of the sort which used to be in almost every public square in the Soviet Union. "Where are we going to find anything to eat in this?"

"It's like the end of the world," I said.

"Have you tried the radio again?"

I shook my head. "It isn't worth it. Napalm eats through wiring faster than it eats through you."

He accepted this and with a naked finger began to clean off the inner rims of the goggles he (like most of us) wore as protection against sun, rain and dust. "I could do with some orders," he said.

"We were instructed to move into the enemy's territory. That's what we're doing."

"Where, we were told, we would link up with American and Australian mounted units. Those fools can't ride. I don't know why they ever thought of putting them on horses. Cowboys!"

I saw no point in repeating an already stale argument. It was true, however, that the Western cavalry divisions found it hard to match our efficient savagery. I had been amused, too, when they had married us briefly with a couple of Mongolian squadrons. The Mongols had not ridden to war in decades and had become something of a laughing stock with their ancient enemies, the Cossacks. Savitsky believed that we were the last great horsemen. Actually, he did not include me; for I was a very poor rider and not a Cossack, anyway. He thought it was our destiny to survive the war and begin a new and braver civilisation: "Free from the influence of women and Jews." He recalled the great days of the Zaporozhian Sech, from which women had been forbidden. Even amongst the Sixth he was regarded as something of a conservative. He continued to be admired more than his opinions.

When the men had watered our horses and replaced the water bags in the cart, Savitsky and I spread the map on a piece of concrete and found our position with the help of the compass and sextant (there were no signs or landmarks). "I wonder what has happened to Angkor," I said. It was where we were supposed to meet other units, including the Canadians to whom, in the months to come, I was to be attached (I was to discover later that they had been in our rear all along).

"You think it's like this?" Savitsky gestured. His noble eyes began to frown. "I mean, comrade, would you say it was worth our while making for Angkor now?"

"We have our orders," I said. "We've no choice. We're expected."

Savitsky blew dust from his mouth and scratched his head. "There's about half our division left. We could do with reinforcements. Mind you, I'm glad we can see a bit of sky at last." We had all felt claustrophobic in the jungle.

"What is it, anyway, this Angkor? Their capital?" he asked me.

"Their Stalingrad, maybe."

Savitsky understood. "Oh, it has an importance to their morale. It's not strategic?"

"I haven't been told about its strategic value."

Savitsky, as usual, withdrew into his diplomatic silence, indicating that he did not believe me and thought that I had been instructed to secrecy. "We'd best push on," he said. "We've a long way to go, eh?"

After we had mounted up, Savitsky and I rode side by side for a while, along the remains of the concrete road. We were some way ahead of the long column, with its riders, its baggage-wagons, and its Makhno-style machine-gun carts. We were sitting targets for any planes and, because there was no cover, Savitsky and his men casually ignored the danger. I had learned not to show my nervousness but I was not at that moment sure how well hidden it was.

"We are the only vital force in Cambodia," said the Division Commander with a beatific smile. "Everything else is dead. How these yellow bastards must hate one another." He was impressed, perhaps admiring.

"Who's to say?" I ventured. "We don't know who else has been fighting. There isn't a nation now that's not in the war."

"And not one that's not on its last legs. Even Switzerland." Savitsky gave a superior snort. "But what an inheritance for us!"

I became convinced that, quietly, he was going insane.

3

We came across an armoured car in a hollow, just off the road. One of our scouts had heard the crew's moans. As Savitsky and I rode up, the scout was covering the uniformed Khmers with his carbine, but they were too far gone to offer us any harm.

"What's wrong with 'em?" Savitsky asked the scout.

The scout did not know. "Disease," he said. "Or starvation. They're not wounded."

We got off our horses and slid down into the crater. The car was undamaged. It appeared to have rolled gently into the dust and become stuck. I slipped into the driving seat and tried to start the engine, but it was dead. Savitsky had kicked one of the wriggling Khmers in the genitals but the man did not seem to notice the pain much, though he clutched himself, almost as if he entered into the spirit of a ritual.

Savitsky was saying "Soldiers. Soldiers," over and over again. It was one of the few Vietnamese words he knew. He pointed in different directions, looking with disgust on the worn-out men. "You'd better question them," he said to me.

They understood my English, but refused to speak it. I tried them in French. "What happened to your machine?"

The man Savitsky had kicked continued to lie on his face, his arms stretched along the ashy ground towards us. I felt he wanted to touch us: to steal our vitality. I felt sick as I put the heel of my boot on his hand. One of his comrades said, "There's no secret to it. We ran out of essence." He pointed to the armoured car. "We ran out of essence."

"You're a long way from your base."

"Our base is gone. There's no essence anywhere."

I believed him and told Savitsky who was only too ready to accept this simple explanation.

As usual, I was expected to dispatch the prisoners. I reached for my holster, but Savitsky, with rare sympathy, stayed my movement. "Go and see what's in that can," he said, pointing. As I waded towards the punctured metal, three shots came from the Division Commander's revolver. I wondered at his mercy. Continuing with this small farce, I looked at the can, held it up, shook it, and threw it back into the dust. "Empty," I said.

Savitsky was climbing the crater towards his horse. As I scrambled behind him he said, "It's the Devil's world. Do you think we should give ourselves up to Him?"

I was astonished by this unusual cynicism.

He got into his saddle. Unconsciously, he assumed the pose, often seen in films and pictures, of the noble revolutionary horseman – his head lifted, his palm shielding his eyes as he peered towards the west.

"We seem to have wound up killing Tatars again," he said with a smile as I got clumsily onto my horse. "Do you believe in all this history, comrade?"

"I've always considered the theory of precedent absolutely infantile," I said.

"What's that?"

I began to explain, but he was already spurring forward, shouting to his men.

4

On the third day we had passed through the ash-desert and our horses could at last crop at some grass on the crest of a line of low hills which looked down on glinting, misty paddy-fields. Savitsky, his field-glasses to his eyes, was relieved. "A village," he said. "Thank god. We'll be able to get some provisions."

"And some exercise," said Pavlichenko behind him. The boy laughed, pushing his cap back on his head and wiping grimy sweat from his brow. "Shall I go down there, comrade?"

Savitsky agreed, telling Pavlichenko to take two others with him. We watched the Cossacks ride down the hill and begin cautiously to wade their horses through the young rice. The sky possessed a greenish tinge here, as if it reflected the fields. It looked like the Black Sea lagoons at midsummer. A smell of foliage, almost shocking in its unfamiliarity, floated up to us. Savitsky was intent on watching the movements of his men, who had unslung their carbines and dismounted as they reached the village. With reins looped on their arms they moved slowly in, firing a few experimental rounds at the huts. One of them took a dummy grenade from his saddle-bag and threw it into a nearby doorway. Peasants, already starving to the point of death it seemed, ran out. The young Cossacks ignored them, looking for soldiers. When they were satisfied that the village was clear of traps, they waved us in. The peasants began to gather together at the centre of the village. Evidently they were used to this sort of operation.

While our men made their thorough search I was again called upon to perform my duty and question the inhabitants. These, it emerged, were almost all intellectuals, part of an old Khmer Rouge re-education programme (virtually a sentence of death by forced labour). It was easier to speak to them but harder to understand their complicated answers. In the end I gave up and, made impatient by the whining appeals of the wretches, ignored them. They knew nothing of use to us. Our men were disappointed in their expectations. There were only old people in

the village. In the end they took the least aged of the women off and had them in what had once been some sort of administration hut. I wondered at their energy. It occurred to me that this was something they expected of one another and that they would lose face if they did not perform the necessary actions. Eventually, when we had eaten what we could find, I returned to questioning two of the old men. They were at least antagonistic to the Cambodian troops and were glad to tell us anything they could. However, it seemed there had been no large movements in the area. The occasional plane or helicopter had gone over a few days earlier. These were probably part of the flight which had attacked us at the river. I asked if they had any news of Angkor, but there was no radio here and they expected us to know more than they did. I pointed towards the purple hills on the other side of the valley. "What's over there?"

They told me that as far as they knew it was another valley, similar to this but larger. The hills looked steeper and were wooded. It would be a difficult climb for us unless there was a road. I got out the map. There was a road indicated. I pointed to it. One of the old men nodded. Yes, he thought that road was still there, for it led, eventually, to this village. He showed me where the path was. It was rutted where, some time earlier, heavy vehicles had been driven along it. It disappeared into dark, green, twittering jungle. All the jungle meant to me now was mosquitoes and a certain amount of cover from attacking planes.

Careless of leeches and insects, the best part of the division was taking the chance of a bath in the stream which fed the paddy-fields. I could not bring myself to strip in the company of these healthy men. I decided to remain dirty until I had the chance of some sort of privacy.

"I want the men to rest," said Savitsky. "Have you any objection to our camping here for the rest of today and tonight?"

"It's a good idea," I said. I sought out a hut, evicted the occupants, and went almost immediately to sleep.

In the morning I was awakened by a trooper who brought me a metal mug full of the most delicately scented tea. I was astonished and accepted it with some amusement. "There's loads of it here," he said. "It's all they've got!"

I sipped the tea. I was still in my uniform, with the burka on the ground beneath me and my leather jacket folded for a pillow. The hut was completely bare. I was used to noticing a few personal possessions and began to wonder if they had hidden their stuff when they had seen us coming. Then I remembered that they were from the towns and had been brought here forcibly. Perhaps now, I thought, the war would pass them by and they would know peace, even happiness, for a bit. I was scratching my ear and stretching when Savitsky came in, looking grim. "We've found a damned burial ground," he said. "Hundreds of bodies in a pit. I think they must be the original inhabitants. And one or two soldiers – at least, they were in uniform."

"You want me to ask what they are?"

"No! I just want to get away. God knows what they've been doing to one another. They're a filthy race. All grovelling and secret killing. They've no guts."

"No soldiers, either," I said. "Not really. They've been preyed on by bandits for centuries. Bandits are pretty nearly the only sort of soldiers they've ever known. So the ones who want to be soldiers emulate them. Those who don't want to be soldiers treat the ones who do as they've always treated bandits. They are conciliatory until they get a chance to turn the tables."

He was impressed by this. He rubbed at a freshly shaven chin. He looked years younger, though he still had the monumental appearance of a god. "Thieves, you mean. They have the mentality of thieves, their soldiers?"

"Aren't the Cossacks thieves?"

"That's foraging." He was not angry. Very little I said could ever anger him because he had no respect for my opinions. I was the necessary political officer, his only link with the higher, distant authority of the Kremlin, but he did not have to respect my ideas any more than he respected those which came to him from Moscow. What he respected there was the power and the fact that in some way Russia was mystically represented in our leaders. "We leave in ten minutes," he said.

I noticed that Pavlichenko had polished his boots for him.

*

By that afternoon, after we had crossed the entire valley on an excellent dirt road through the jungle and had reached the top of the next range of hills, I had a pain in my stomach. Savitsky noticed me holding my hands against my groin and said laconically, "I wish the doctor hadn't been killed. Do you think it's typhus?" Naturally, it was what I had suspected.

"I think it's just the tea and the rice and the other stuff. Maybe mixing with all the dust we've swallowed."

He looked paler than usual. "I've got it, too. So have half the others. Oh, shit!"

It was hard to tell, in that jungle at that time of day, if you had a fever. I decided to put the problem out of my mind as much as possible until sunset when it would become cooler.

The road began to show signs of damage and by the time we were over the hill and looking down on the other side we were confronting scenery if anything more desolate than that which we had passed through on the previous three days. It was a grey desert, scarred by the broken road and bomb-craters. Beyond this and coming towards us was a wall of dark dust; unmistakably an army on the move. Savitsky automatically relaxed in his saddle and turned back to see our men moving slowly up the wooded hill. "I think they must be heading this way." Savitsky cocked his head to one side. "What's that?"

It was a distant shriek. Then a whole squadron of planes was coming in low. We could see their crudely painted Khmer Rouge markings, their battered fuselages. The men began to scatter off the road, but the planes ignored us. They went zooming by, seeming to be fleeing rather than attacking. I looked at the sky, but nothing followed them.

We took our field-glasses from their cases and adjusted them. In the dust I saw a mass of barefoot infantry bearing rifles with fixed bayonets. There were also trucks, a few tanks, some private cars, bicycles, motorbikes, ox-carts, hand-carts, civilians with bundles. It was an orgy of defeated soldiers and refugees.

"I think we've missed the action." Savitsky was furious. "We were beaten to it, eh? And by Australians, probably!"

My impulse to shrug was checked. "Damn!" I said a little weakly.

This caused Savitsky to laugh at me. "You're relieved. Admit it!"

I knew that I dare not share his laughter, lest it become hysterical and turn to tears, so I missed a moment of possible comradeship. "What shall we do?" I asked. "Go round them?"

"It would be easy enough to go through them. Finish them off. It would stop them destroying this valley, at least." He did not, by his tone, much care.

The men were assembling behind us. Savitsky informed them of the nature of the rabble ahead of us. He put his field-glasses to his eyes again and said to me: "Infantry, too. Quite a lot. Coming on faster."

I looked. The barefoot soldiers were apparently pushing their way through the refugees to get ahead of them.

"Maybe the planes radioed back," said Savitsky. "Well, it's something to fight."

"I think we should go round," I said. "We should save our strength. We don't know what's waiting for us at Angkor."

"It's miles away yet."

"Our instructions were to avoid any conflict we could," I reminded him.

He sighed. "This is Satan's own country." He was about to give the order which would comply with my suggestion when, from the direction of Angkor Wat, the sky burst into white fire. The horses reared and whinnied. Some of our men yelled and flung their arms over their eyes. We were all temporarily blinded. Then the dust below seemed to grow denser and denser. We watched in fascination as the dark wall became taller, rushing upon us and howling like a million dying voices. We were struck by the ash and forced onto our knees, then onto our bellies, yanking our frightened horses down with us as best we could. The stuff stung my face and hands and even those parts of my body protected by heavy clothing. Larger pieces of stone rattled against my goggles.

When the wind had passed and we began to stand erect, the sky was still very bright. I was astonished that my field-glasses were intact. I put them up to my burning eyes and peered through swirling ash at the Cambodians. The army was running along the road towards us, as terrified animals flee a forest fire. I knew now what the planes had

been escaping. Our Cossacks were in some confusion, but were already regrouping, shouting amongst themselves. A number of horses were still shying and whickering but by and large we were all calm again.

"Well, comrade," said Savitsky with a sort of mad satisfaction, "what do we do now? Wasn't that Angkor Wat, where we're supposed to meet our allies?"

I was silent. The mushroom cloud on the horizon was growing. It had the hazy outlines of a gigantic, spreading cedar tree, as if all at once that wasteland of ash had become promiscuously fertile. An aura of bloody red seemed to surround it, like a silhouette in the sunset. The strong, artificial wind was still blowing in our direction. I wiped dust from my goggles and lowered them back over my eyes. Savitsky gave the order for our men to mount. "Those bastards down there are in our way," he said. "We're going to charge them."

"What?" I could not believe him.

"When in doubt," he told me, "attack."

"You're not scared of the enemy," I said, "but there's the radiation."

"I don't know anything about radiation." He turned in his saddle to watch his men. When they were ready he drew his sabre. They imitated him. I had no sabre to draw.

I was horrified. I pulled my horse away from the road. "Division Commander Savitsky, we're duty-bound to conserve…"

"We're duty-bound to make for Angkor," he said. "And that's what we're doing." His perfect body poised itself in the saddle. He raised his sabre.

"It's not like ordinary dying," I began. But he gave the order to trot forward. There was a rictus of terrifying glee on each mouth. The light from the sky was reflected in every eye.

I moved with them. I had become used to the security of numbers and I could not face their disapproval. But gradually they went ahead of me until I was in the rear. By this time we were almost at the bottom of the hill and cantering towards the mushroom cloud which was now shot through with all kinds of dark, swirling colours. It had become like a threatening hand, while the wind-borne ash stung our bodies and drew blood on the flanks of our mounts.

Yakovlev, just ahead of me, unstrapped his accordion and began to play some familiar Cossack battle-song. Soon they were all singing. Their pace gradually increased. The noise of the accordion died but their song was so loud now it seemed to fill the whole world. They reached full gallop, charging upon that appalling outline, the quintessential symbol of our doom, as their ancestors might have charged the very gates of Hell. They were swift, dark shapes in the dust. The song became a savage, defiant roar.

My first impulse was to charge with them. But then I had turned my horse and was trotting back towards the valley and the border, praying that, if I ever got to safety, I would not be too badly contaminated.

The Braining of Mother Lamprey

SIMON D. INGS

IT WAS A COLD MORNING, two days before Jape Day, and little children were eating the eyeballs of corpses in Blood Park. Ashura the apprentice cycled past the onlookers and the hawkers selling sweetmeats, alive to the wind in his face and the vibration of the bike beneath his body. It was a wonderful day to be alive in this of all cities, and Ashura smiled into the sunlight that dappled the narrow street.

He rounded a corner into Grape Street, where the vintners held court, readying themselves for the coming festivities. He dismounted and pushed his bike past the steaming chutes and the open cess-run at the centre of the road, dazzled by the coloured light reflected from shop windows.

It had rained that night, and the cobblestones were slick with a greenish slime, exuded as if from the pores of the rock itself: a characteristic of the streets of GodGate. Ashura slid and slipped and skipped along, lifting the heavy frame of his bike as he crossed the open sewer, and made for the end of the run of shops. In a narrow doorway shadowed by bird-nested eaves he paused and rummaged in his breeches pocket for the rusty key.

In the shadow cast by a casement window high up in the peach-plastered building, half a dozen street urchins were making a pile of their turds. They moved and squatted with cat-like gestures and their sharp, wet teeth flashed when they laughed.

Ashura's fingers found the key. He pushed the door open and entered, pulling his bicycle in after him. He leaned it against a banister-rail and

clattered up the rickety staircase. At the top he knocked, then waited respectfully.

"Enter," came a querulous, age-cracked voice. Half-cringing, Ashura opened the door. It squealed on dry hinges. His master stood within, head cocked like some huge carrion-bird to watch the entrant. Beady-eyed and ancient, he stood in robes that were more for protection from the chill than for reasons of tradition. There was a pallor to him today, a strange pastiness to his much-wrinkled flesh. Ashura ascribed it to the warlock's recent diet of chaffinch brains.

"Did you fetch it?" he demanded of Ashura.

Ashura nodded to his master, almost bowing. "I did, sir." He held it in his capacious pocket, a stoneware jar capped by a thick pitch seal; a jar just large enough to hold something disquieting. His hand shook as he held it out at arm's length, proffering it to the master.

The old man whipped out a hand with surprising agility and snatched the jar from him, as if he feared Ashura would drop it. For his part, the apprentice breathed a sigh of relief. He hoped that Master Urkhan would let him leave before he put it to use; to some things he had no wish to be apprenticed.

There was a rattle and a clatter from the yard. Urkhan whirled and tottered to the window. "Look at that!" he screeched, with a voice like an ungreased fiddle bow.

Ashura winced. Dutiful, he approached the window. Someone or something had knocked over Urkhan's capacious rubbish bin. Feathers blew about the yard. Little bird bones lay strewn in a heap over the cobbles. "Babies! Ferals! No-goods!" the warlock shouted. "We should make the Blood Park fence twenty-foot high!"

He turned from the window and twittered. Straight away Ashura felt a vicious itch behind his eyes: Urkhan had placed wards on the room when he first arrived at this city. It was unpleasant; Ashura drew away from his master hastily. Urkhan stopped twittering and the itch subsided. The window at which they stood shook in its frame as a ward passed through it on its way to clear up the mess.

"Ee, it has taken long enough," said the master, rubbing the pot Ashura had given him with a parched hand. He glanced at the boy with

sly, squinting eyes. "An' did you tell him as I said?" There was menace in his voice.

"I did," said Ashura, stonily. "He told me it was best raw with lemon."

His master ran a pale tongue over crumpled lips. He walked across the room as if his old bones ached, cradling the small pot. Beneath the stuffed alligator and the bronze orrery that hung, verdigris-stained, from the rafters, he paused and placed the pot at the fulcrum of a strange ideogram inscribed on the floor in wax melted from a red candle. Ashura cleared his throat.

"What is it now?" said Urkhan, tetchily. "Have you not – "

"If it please you, Master, I have not slept since yesterday night. Might I have leave…?"

"Yes, yes, begone at once. I have work to do…" The master brushed him away with a flapping motion of his hands as he concentrated. Ashura, knowing his luck to be in, made for the door as silently as he could and pulled it to behind him. The master would expect him back as soon as his business was concluded.

Ashura broke into a cold sweat at the thought. *Truly Urkhan is puissant,* he thought, *but I want none of it at such a price!* Still, the day was young and the master would be busy for hours yet – time to do as a young apprentice would.

Outdoors it was still cold, but now the chill was welcome. He passed his bike and walked out into Grape Street.

The urchins squatted around the pile they had made, and one of them pressed something pale and blood-stained into the writhing dung. A stiff breeze blew across the street, carrying with it feathers and flecks of down.

Soon enough, the excrement shuddered and bubbled. The urchins drew back. A blackish, segmented thing flapped free of the quivering mass and swooped up into the rectangle of sunshine visible between the houses. It hovered there, taking form, shaping itself around the bones of the salvaged chaffinch skeleton with greater and greater facility. The crude flaps of its wings sheened in the light and blossomed with

rainbow colours. It made a tentative, fart-like noise and was gone. The urchins' whoops of delight echoed in his ears as Ashura made his way down the chilly thoroughfare. He grinned and shook his head. Kids!

He sobered when he saw the mourning party, traversing the central square. They wore cheap cloth of traditional green and carried kitchenware – pots, ladles and knives – all burnished to a high sheen. Poor people, making much of the death of one of their number. Now, who would command that kind of attention?

He turned up a side-street, keeping to leeward of the central sluice. Ahead he saw a party of cessbeaters.

"Ashura!"

He cast a cautious eye over the three men. Some of his old comrades had never got over their jealousy at his recently acquired status of warlock's apprentice. He was sure to have a rough time at their hands on Jape Day, if not before…

"Ashura!"

The voice was familiar. Belatedly, he recognized Culpole. He grinned and walked over.

Culpole and his colleagues were covered head to foot in excrement. It writhed over their gloved hands and jerkins, groping blindly for new form. Where it touched skin, though, it withered and fell. Cessbeaters regularly smeared themselves with a charmed ointment made to quell rotten matter's zest for life. They dipped their hazel brushes in a similar ointment and swept the walls of the sluices with it. This retarded the foul matter's growth till it was well past city boundaries.

"Still no patron, Culpole?" Culpole was a would-be poet. When they were children, just past the feral period, Ashura talked spells and enchantments while Culpole murmured softer, more subtle magics. It seemed for a long time that Culpole would be the more successful of the two. It hadn't worked out that way, but their friendship was as strong as ever.

Culpole shook his head sadly. "I had great hopes of Frenklyn the Steward, but he wanted favours other than words from me. They say his sperm is so potent he has made men pregnant."

Ashura sighed. "You were wise to think better of that alliance.

Tell me, who's the funeral party for?"

"Mother Lamprey," another cessbeater replied.

"The oracle?"

"The one," the stranger replied. "Someone threw a pot out a window as she stepped into her alley. Brained her dead."

Culpole shook his head. "I'd have thought it would take more than crockery to dash the brains of Mother Lamprey. She was a wise one."

"Life was hot within her," affirmed the stranger. "When she walked past Blood Park they say flowers bloomed in dead men's groins."

"And Mother Runnell?" Ashura enquired.

"She's in mourning, naturally," Culpole replied. "Last I heard she was silent at the funeral and left the feasts early. She's taken it bad."

Ashura glanced up at the sun. Just enough time left to investigate. "Look, Culpole, I'll catch you later. I must run."

He walked off, somewhat guiltily; he shouldn't have left Culpole like that, so hurriedly. Culpole had been close to Mother Lamprey, and it was ill-luck that his duties as cessbeater had kept him from the hanging and the wake. Ashura well remembered how Culpole used to pass on stories she told him about the Old Time, when the tide of things was still turned to dying and Science held sway.

Ashura thought of the scientists he had seen wandering the city – pathetic creatures full of half-remembered schemata and faked ritual, their ludicrous labcoats torn and crammed with totemic pens, their heads filled with some gibberish called mathematics.

Respect them, Mother Lamprey had said to him and Culpole once, when their post-feral laughter rose too high and cruel at her description of them. "They walk the paths of the dying at a time of bloom; their systems are misplaced. But come the next millennium and their time will have come again. Then our broomsticks and elixirs will be as risible to the good folk of the world as their mechanics are now." Wise old woman. Strong old woman. Dead? Strange…

Foxtongue was leaning against the entrance to the Walking Eye tavern. Her shirt was open; her tender breasts and her child-swollen stomach glowed in the sun as if they would melt the cotton around them.

Ashura caught his breath and strode over to her.

"I came as soon as I heard," he announced, hoping she'd take his blushes for signs of exhaustion and effort. By the wry look in her eyes there wasn't much hope of that.

"It's been a long time, Father-to-be." Her voice was like honey in climax.

He forgave her the sardonic remark instantly. "I…I'd like to see Mother Runnell."

She smiled and led him through the tavern. It was nearly empty, Ashura noticed; the regulars must all be at the funeral feast. Round the back of the inn, in a brick yard thick with dust and weeds, sat the shawled bulk of Mother Runnell. She turned rheumed eyes to meet him. She did not smile and, even given the present circumstances, he found that disconcerting.

"Foxtongue, leave us. Go mend your Jape Day dress or something," she commanded, and there was an edge to her voice Ashura hadn't heard before. Foxtongue flounced back into the inn, causing Ashura a final pang.

"And so," the oracle said, observing him through clouded green eyes. The silence stretched. In spite of himself, Ashura found himself surveying her huge bulk.

Mother Runnell had been pregnant with the same child for some twenty-eight years. It was nowhere near adult size – more the size of a feral. Nonetheless, it made an impressive addition to the woman's natural bulk.

Mother Runnell was that rare phenomenon, an oracle; a permanently pregnant seer. The townsfolk came and told her stories, rumours, gossip, opinions – and Mother Runnell passed the messages on in her blood to her ever-underdeveloped child. The child in turn would mull over the flavours of the world outside, and dance in Mother Runnell the likely outcome. Mother Runnell and her fleshly charge could not predict major events, but they could predict people's fortunes with shivering accuracy.

"I don't want your condolence, Mite," she said at last.

Mite – his nickname as a post-feral, dropped in early adolescence and

not heard since then. Ashura lowered his head. He'd stumbled upon some hurt, some worry. Quick of temper and of wit he might be. But life on the streets had told him well when to bite his tongue.

"You've chosen a strange course, Mite. I wish you were Mite once more, so you could choose again. You may well hang your head in shame."

"Not shame, Mother, puzzle – "

"Silence!" She'd meant it, presumably, to be an imperious command, but it came out tinged with hysteria and the weakness of an old woman. "You are a pander, a tool of evil work. We – " she stroked her belly – "cannot say whether you are aware of this, but we fear the worst."

"I keep my eyes open," said Ashura. "But I cannot see through locked doors, or closed minds."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning Master Urkhan is a wily, mischievous old bastard whose very eyes don't trust each other, hence the squint."

Mother Runnell grinned, very briefly, very warmly. Then the cold, worried mask was back. "So. Have you heard about Mother Lamprey's death?"

"That's why I'm here, to say I'm sorry…"

"Aaach," she snapped, "I didn't say, 'that she died,' I said 'about her death.' Of how she died, boy. Do you know how?"

"Brained by a pot."

"Have you any idea how tough old Lamprey was?"

"That…occurred to me, too. It must have been a damn large pot."

"You tell me. Neighbours saw the thing fall, that's all. Can't say after it hit that they gave it much thought."

Some reflex made Ashura glance up into the sky. He did a double-take. The clouds there were pink-edged. He was late. "Mother Runnell, I must go now."

"Your good master requiring more favours of your good will?"

"Well I *am* his apprentice."

"More deliveries?"

Ashura stood up and dusted himself down. "No doubt." The next second he was staring at her. "How, how…"

"What was in the pot, Ashura?" And all of a sudden Mother Runnell's eyes didn't seem bleared at all, but emerald and piercing.

"A dead ancient's brain," Ashura replied in a whisper.

"How do you know?"

Ashura looked at the ground, abashed. "I don't know. I didn't look, if that's what you mean. I can only surmise that's what it was from what I heard behind locked doors."

"Ahh," she said, and started rocking, back and forth, very slowly, "you do keep your eyes and ears open, young Mite, after all. I'm glad to hear it. Your life may depend on it, someday." Ashura shivered at the pronouncement but the oracle's smile was warm. "Now come, tell me, what was the brain for?"

"Master Urkhan's old wards are wearing down. He made them from squirrel and cat and other small animals. He's made new ones from chaffinches, but he hasn't used any of them. I think he's after something a little stronger."

"A ward from the *ka* of a dead man?"

Ashura nodded, blushing.

Mother Runnell tutted. "Oh, Mite, what have you got yourself involved in? You know that's a restricted practice. If the burghers heard… Who provided the brain?"

"Trimghoul."

"The psychokine?"

"The same."

"And where did he get it?"

"From Blood Park, so he said."

"And do you really believe him, Ashura?" Ashura, his correct name. Seriousness. Mother Runnell's questions were in deadly earnest.

Did he believe Trimghoul? He thought of the man, astride his skittish gelding and shrouded in his habitual garb, an unnerving costume of black net that covered him from head to foot. Things started slotting into place inside Ashura's head, forming a pattern he didn't much care for – not at all.

His tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. "What must I do?" he stammered.

"Act upon your suspicions," she replied simply. "That's not so hard, is it?" Something cold slithered down Ashura's spine.

Foxtongue was waiting inside. She was sitting on a rough oak table, her feet up on a stool. Ashura gave her a worried smile as he made for the door.

"No time to show me a trick or two, Warlock?"

"'Fraid not," he shrugged.

"Do you fear your master's scolding that much?"

Yes, something screamed at him. Yes. But Ashura sensed that whatever displeasure he might encounter by arriving late this afternoon, it was as nothing to the roasting he might suffer should he follow Mother Runnell's advice, as he knew he must.

So he went back to the table where Foxtongue sat and with an unconvincing attempt at a jaunty smile he stroked up the material of her dress, lifted her leg and kissed her calf. And as if she knew, and maybe she did, how he needed someone then, how afraid he really was, she lifted her skirts for him.

Late that night, with the moon full and lime green through his window, Ashura got out of bed and began to dress. He bound his feet in leather thongs, then pulled on stout boots. He slipped on a jacket made from oiled canvas. It was worn and not as tough as he would have liked, but it was all he had. He tied polished black chaps around his trousers. He had bought them to impress womenfolk. Tonight, they would serve a more practical purpose. Life, new form, it was an infection here, and of course the children carried it. Life was strong in them.

He went to the sink and armed himself with a razor. He padded down the stairs, careful not to wake the other sleepers in the tenement. He did not take his bicycle, but trotted light-footed towards the dark centre of the city, and Blood Park.

Decorations had been hung over the city's main thoroughfare in preparation for the Jape Day festival. Immense jointed papier-mâché heads painted in clown's colours rocked in their wire cradles, sending shadows scudding across the moonlit street. They grinned at him, and

Ashura shuddered. They winked and squealed their wire hinges. The red paint around their full lips was black in the moonlight, and gave to the line of each huge mouth a skeletal spareness. Their jaws swung open and closed. A row of bats clung to the lips of one, till a sudden gust swung the gaping, star-filled maw shut with a hollow, wooden concussion. The bats fled and plummeted into a side-alley.

The houses which fronted the flagstoned alley bulged like the buds of unnaturally huge flowers, or the pregnant bellies of giants. Timber balks two storeys up held the walls apart; flags and bright streamers covered the dark timber, only now they were colourless and tatty in the pitiless light. They wove about themselves with undersea slowness, like stranded things.

For comfort, Ashura thought back to former festivals. The memories were childlike, unclouded by the shadow of Urkhan. On Jape Day young girls earned pennies setting trip-wires across the streets. In the hours before dawn they suspended buckets of water and powder dye and paint in ingenious, thoroughly insecure harnesses between the rooftops of this most ancient and fertile of cities – and this was but the beginning.

Throughout the day townsfolk set trap after trap, large and small, for their fellows. Ashura's street came together to nail the contents of a grandee's mansion to its sun-baked roof. At lunchtime, someone sent an intricate clockwork spider marching up his trousers. Ashura responded by slipping a tight-wound elastic snake beneath a councillor's travelling blanket as he watched the city's navvies dismantle an iron bridge. Ashura followed the workmen when they took the girders away, and watched them rebuild it so it strung together the houses of notorious rivals.

In the evening, trouvères played the lute, jesters juggled flaming brands, grinning crones sold nosegays for tuppence and witches and warlocks demonstrated their arts in night-long shows of tricks, fireworks, curiosities and miracles….

But not Urkhan.

Not Urkhan, not this year, and Ashura feared to know why.

The gate and fence of Blood Park were guarded night and day to prevent errant wizards from practising restricted arts. He, a wizard's

apprentice, had no choice but to enter Blood Park surreptitiously by the section of fence furthest from the gallows and least carefully patrolled.

They had given Mother Lamprey the funeral rites of an ancient as a mark of respect. He could see from a distance feral children swinging on the fresh rope.

He climbed up the high barbed fence walling in the bodies of the city's dead.

Nothing died in the city, not without a struggle. Mother Lamprey had explained it to him once.

GodGate was the nub, the centre, the very place where the world's change from death to bloom had begun. God himself, who had grown feeble during the Age of Science, had been reborn in this city, bringing in the new Age of Wizardry. According to Mother Lamprey, God was a woman now, Earth Mother, fecund and savage. Her influence was manifold – in the way the very leavings and excrement of the city would sprout and run riot if left untended, in the way a man's sperm could breed new forms not just in women, but in other men, even in animals (centaurs had terrorized the city's womenfolk that spring); and in the way the children of the city were born feral and self-sufficient, leaving their mothers' milk for lovers to suck away while they fought other children in hideous, bloody battles of selection.

For safety's sake the townsfolk threw their savage and bloodthirsty newborns into the park and let them feast and grow on the richly flavoured corpses of ancients, securely contained behind high fences.

It took intelligence, teamwork and patience to scale from the inside the ugly, curving spears of the Blood Park fence. You couldn't climb it until you were tall, patient and could collaborate with others.

One night Culpole and Ashura had resisted the temptation to attack each other, had instead helped each other escape to the outside. They had joined the adult world together.

Ashura dropped down, felt his boots squish and slide on loose flesh. He heard the patter of tiny, lethal feet. He would use his blade if he had to, certain that he wouldn't kill anything. Nothing short of dismemberment could kill a feral for good. A slashed face or stomach, however, would give him time to escape an attacker. His eyes had adjusted to the

light. He could see faint objects stir in the chaos of limb, torso and skull. He walked carefully towards the gallows.

There was the slightest hint of corruption to the air. In past times, Mother Lamprey had said, the scent of such places was so strong as to be unbearable, and dread plagues brought death to anyone who ventured near. Even the fresh aroma of excrement was tainted and vile in those times, and carried sickness. The thought threatened to turn his stomach.

He was brought up short by twin green sparks near his feet. He was by the corpse of an old woman. Her breasts had creamed and had melted through the lattice of her chest. Her head was missing. Again the flash. A baby peered through the bars of her ribs. Teeth gleamed. Then it flung itself back, scrambled away across the carnage. Claws flung shreds of flesh skywards as it fled.

Ashura reached the funeral gallows without further incident. The area was clear and tended. He looked with yearning at the tidy gravel path leading to the main gate.

It had taken him twenty minutes to get this far. By the main gate it would have taken a mere two, and it would have been a lot safer.

The feral children who had played on the rope were nowhere to be seen. He approached the gallows and caught on the night air the metallic tang of fresh blood. She lay in a pool of intestine and fluid on the far side of the platform. Her stomach was laid open. Her half-consumed foetus glistened in the light. Ashura bent his head in funerary meditation, and did his best to ignore the saliva that was filling his mouth. The smell was delicious. He closed his eyes.

Something scrabbled towards him, was on him, was tearing at the too-thin sleeve of his jerkin, and he was pivoting, taking the child off its feet, reaching for his razor. The child dug its claws in. With sickening slowness, Ashura felt a single barb of chitin penetrate the flesh of his arm. Then the blade was out and buried in his attacker's mouth.

The girl gurgled and chewed on the tempered steel, released her grip. He could feel new tissue encircle and entrap the blade. He yanked it free only with difficulty. Blood fountained from her mouth as she scampered away.

By the time she calmed down enough to feel pain, her mouth would have healed. Ashura had left that happy time behind. His arm would take weeks to heal. And it hurt like hell.

He dropped the knife. It rang against Mother Lamprey's skull.

His stomach jolted up into his mouth. It *rang?*

He knelt down, rapped at the old woman's bald head, lifted it up to test its weight, then turned it and used a finger to probe behind the eyeball.

Mother Lamprey's skull was empty.

He was woken the next morning by a stinging sensation in his arm. He undid the crude dressing he had strapped to the wound the night before and gazed dumbfounded at the curl of gristle that was a baby's ear, sprouting smoothly from the surface of his skin. Blood rushed through his head; he felt his face suffused with heat. This could spread. Cancer. Malformation. His whole arm taken up with a child's face, eyes, a – a mouth.

Ashura reached the sink barely in time to save the polished floor from his vomit. It blossomed and quivered with identity and he had to beat it down the plughole with a flannel, then boil a kettle and chase it with the water through the crude copper pipe. Its screams were terrible.

He leaned up against the basin, shivering. The ear on his arm twitched.

Ashura staggered back to his bed and laid his head in his hands. "This isn't happening," he told himself, and wished he could believe his words.

It wasn't as if such things were unheard of. They were. They were easily dealt with, too. All you had to do was have it removed by a psychokine. Who was GodGate's psychokine? Trimghoul. Who stole Mother Lamprey's brain? Trimghoul. Who would know precisely what Ashura had been up to if he revealed the ear on his forearm?

Trimghoul.

Trimghoul the psychokine lived on the outskirts of the city, in an expensive villa tended by many burly servants. He was a recluse, and a hypo-

chondriac. He rarely ventured abroad, and when he did so, he wore a beekeeper's hat with a long, black veil, long gloves of grey cotton and a sable topcoat with silver edging, which he never removed, no matter the fineness of the weather. Folk who had visited him spoke of elaborate and intimate searches of their belongings and their person prior to the audience, and of the unbearable closeness of his apartments, of windows nailed shut and waxed to keep out draughts, or glassless and screened by tight muslin cloths.

Ashura walked up the gravel drive, nodding soberly to the men whose task it was to pour gallon after gallon of expensive, bewitched insecticide onto the garden shrubs. Ashura shivered. Trimghoul's wealth had always disturbed him. Now it scared him, for he had begun to wonder whence that wealth had originated.

He stepped into the shade of an ornate iron-worked portico and reached for the heavy brass knocker, fashioned in the shape of a human jawbone.

A balding man with bright, blue eyes, lips too full for such a jowl-ridden jaw and hands that knew no manners, searched him, stripped him of his coat and outer shoes and trussed him up in a clean white apron. Trimghoul was in his study. There were no porters or butlers beyond the portico, and the house was never locked. It was a sign of Trimghoul's power. Who could harm a man who could control objects at a distance? It would take the brute force of a dozen or more to overcome him, if it came to it.

Ashura knocked on the door.

"Come." That cultured, masterful voice. No wonder Trimghoul, for all his eccentricity, was a favourite among the ladies of the region.

Ashura opened the door. Trimghoul's face was beautiful in the way that all frail-boned, high-cheeked men are beautiful – delicate in feature but strong in poise. He wore a high collar and a sober black suit.

By contrast, his only other exposed flesh – his hands and wrists – were covered in hair, gnarled and powerful-looking, and his gait was stooped and awkward, as if he found it much more comfortable to bend his knees the opposite way. Ashura had never seen Trimghoul *en deshabillé*, but, from what he had heard, Trimghoul's face was the most

human thing about him. The rest of him brought to mind the disturbing eroticism of satyrs.

True to report, a fire burned savagely behind an iron grate. The heat was barely tolerable. Ashura felt his forehead and cheeks prick with moisture.

"Ah, young 'prentice. More requests from my old friend Urkhan?"

"N-no. Actually, I wonder if you can help me." Ashura blushed.

Trimghoul misinterpreted the redness in the boy's cheeks. "Ah," he said, wisely. "Woman trouble, eh? Well, it happens to the best of us. Got a would-be oracle pregnant before her time, I suppose? Well, send her along, no need to act all blushful, we're men of the world old chap, eh?" He chuckled. His teeth were very small, and were all exactly alike… "I'll dump her child on some ape or big cat and send it to a circus. For the usual fee, of course."

Trimghoul specialized in the production of carnival curios and hybrid pets for wealthy ladies of the region. There existed a harmless rivalry between these ladies, which found expression not only in their dress, their jewels, and (at the more permissive venues) their adjudged skill in performance with centaurs, but also in what pets they possessed.

Be it an animal out of legend – a Square Woolly Pig, say – or a wild, modern scherzo in dachshund, peacock and halibut, a Trimghoulian pet was the *sine qua non* of GodGate's polite society.

Such psychokinetic trivia were the source of Trimghoul's considerable social popularity; they were also the hook from which he hung his amatory successes. Trimghoul's dalliance with the womenfolk was due as much to his risqué payment methods, as to the more conventional tools of seduction.

"That's not the problem," Ashura admitted. The ear twitched on his forearm.

"Well, come along, out with it, glad to help a young man with ambition." A fly landed on Trimghoul's forehead. It sparked and vanished. A little red place on the psychokine's forehead remained. He stared around him with a fierce expression. "How in *hell's* name did that get in here? Were you cleaned?"

"Y-yes!" Ashura stepped back, startled by Trimghoul's fierce expression.

A second, and all anger was gone. Trimghoul's face was its even, bronzed hue once more. "Come now, my boy."

Ashura took a deep breath – and drew up the sleeve of his shirt.

Trimghoul stared at Ashura's forearm. His expression was severe.

"Tell me you were delivering a baby and it scratched you."

"Yes, I…"

"Now tell me the truth."

"Please get it off me," Ashura begged.

Trimghoul looked deep into his eyes. The red mark on his forehead was still there. His pupils were black, dilated, huge.

"Please," Ashura whispered.

Trimghoul sniffed, glanced at Ashura's arm. There was a tiny flash, heat burst on his skin. Ashura looked down. The ear was gone as if it had never been.

"Do you want to know where I put it?" Trimghoul's voice was cold and soft.

Ashura said nothing. He stared at his arm and waited for what might follow.

"I placed it on the forehead of a young boy known throughout the city for snooping and prying and getting in people's way."

Instinctively, Ashura brought his hand up to his face, but there was nothing there.

Trimghoul sighed and turned away from him to stare out the window at the city. "Oh dear, young man, you are an open book. Why do young boys get themselves in scrapes like this if they cannot dissemble to their elders? You were playing with corpses in Blood Park last night, yes?"

"Yes," Ashura dropped his gaze to the floor.

"And what did you find?"

Ashura's fists clenched. He tightened what resolve he had and said, "You killed Mother Lamprey."

Trimghoul whirled round. His face was twisted in a red mask of bestial fury. A blast of light seared Ashura's face. "Don't cross me, tyke. I

could rip out your balls and eyes and juggle them in front of your face without even blinking. And who's to say I'd put them back in quite the same places?" He spat and turned away. "Get out of my sight." He scratched at the sore place on his forehead.

Ashura felt a line of blood trickle down his cheek. He turned and ran.

Back in his room, Ashura stared at his reflection in the mirror above the sink. Trimghoul had shaved one side of his head, nicking it in several places. He thought of the fly, of the sore place that was left on Trimghoul's forehead when he made the fly vanish. A hasty or unconscious performance of his art left crude results, obviously.

Ashura ran his hand over the shaved side of his head. It was not the most even cut of his life. Ashura tried to grin at the thought but his reflection sent back a wan death-mask in reply.

There came a knock at his door. It was Culpole. He stood ashen-faced, trembling, cap stretched to tearing between his hands. "Ashura, come quick, there's – " He noticed Ashura's shaven scalp. "But what happened to your – no matter, follow me." He made to say more, but thought better of it, turned and strode down the echoing hallway, kicking dust from the bare, warped boards as he went. "Come on!" he called, urgency cracking his voice.

Ashura grabbed his coat and hurried after his friend. "What is it?" The stairs clattered and shook as they hurried down.

"Foxtongue's had her leg taken off by the wheel of a fairground float." Ashura stared aghast at Culpole's harassed profile as they traversed the little square towards the Walking Eye tavern. "She was out buying curried sweets for Jape Day. She had a fainting fit, her foot slipped on a cobble…the ruts on the street are deep; they're sharp too. The wheel, it scissored her bone clean through."

Cold sweat tickled Ashura's back. "She's lost her leg?"

Culpole nodded, and coughed. "Above the knee, my friend."

Ashura let out a moan; his stride faltered and sagged. "Her *leg?"*

Culpole nodded. He turned to his stricken comrade. "Ashura," he said. "We'll catch it. It can't have gone far. Cess-beaters know the city

backwards." He took Ashura's hand and squeezed it. "We'll find your bedmate's limb in time. Trust me."

Foxtongue lay in the dip of Mother Runnell's capacious bed at the Walking Eye. She was only half-conscious – Culpole had mixed her a sleeping draught – but the pain was still there. It came in waves, and her face distorted in a rictus of agony as she passed from one moment of slurred somnolence to the next. Ashura sat at the head of the bed and brushed the damp chestnut hair from her face.

"Ashura?" she whispered through dry lips. He wetted them with his mouth. Her breath was shallow and fetid. "Ashura, how long?"

Ashura glanced at Culpole. Culpole held up three fingers straight, and one bent at the knuckle.

"It's been on the hop for under four hours," Ashura told her.

Foxtongue set her jaw. Her eyes bored a challenge into Ashura's own. "How much time do I have?"

Ashura took a deep, ragged breath and pulled back the linen which covered Foxtongue from the waist down. Mother Runnell had wisely prepared a dung dressing. The wound was sealed, and the excrement was parchment-tough where it closed off the stump. Around the edges, the transformed waste matter had adopted the consistency and pallor of untanned skin. Tough black hairs stubbled the line of the join. Lymph and blood had stained the sheets, but a little weeping from the wound was to be expected.

Foxtongue howled with pain when Ashura touched a fingertip to the dressing. He whispered apologies in her ear and kissed it. "What happened to you?" he said.

"I – I felt ill, faint, as if something had got between me and my eyes, and I just…I just…" Pain and fear swelled her eyes with tears.

Ashura put a comforting hand on her swollen belly.

A static shock flung him from the bed. He stumbled and fell back against Culpole, and they went sprawling. Culpole scrambled up, his eyes wide in shock, and helped Ashura up. "It's a ward," Ashura muttered. "There's a ward in my child."

He went back to the bed and laid his hand more carefully upon Foxtongue's belly. He looked at her, wondering what to say, but she had slipped into fitful half-consciousness.

There! In his head, a vicious twitching, a scraping sensation behind the eyeballs…

He felt his jaw tighten in confusion and anger. He forced his mouth to relax, pursed his lips and twittered. Culpole stared at him and, overcome by the tension of the moment, laughed out loud. Ashura motioned impatiently for him to be silent. There! A response from the ward hidden in his lover, a scrabbling under his hand. Claws, the tickle of feathers. The whisper of a little birdy brain. It repeated one message, over and over again, swirling it around and back in an unending, numbing syncopation…

"Well, what is it?" Culpole took Ashura's shoulder.

Ashura shook his head and blinked. He stared about him as if he had just awoken in a strange room. "Passing husks is hell," he said.

"What?"

Ashura caught sight of Foxtongue, and revived. "It's a ward made out of a chaffinch," he said. "What's more I can guess *whose* chaffinch."

Foxtongue stirred and came awake once more, panting with pain.

A commotion outside the door silenced them.

"Get – *grab it,* man!"

"Ach! The bloody thing went and…"

"Right behind the… HOLD IT STILL!"

"The door! The door!"

"Ee dee dee, dee ee…"

"Gag the little…"

"OPEN THE BLOODY DOOR!"

Culpole sprang to the latch, unfastened it, and went flying again as four burly cessbeaters, covered from head to toe in the stuff of their trade, were pulled through the door by a pole of savage, straining flesh – Foxtongue's leg.

"Dee," it sang, *"Ee dee dee."* It pulled free of its captors and leapt aboard the bed. It pressed its needle-toothed stump to Foxtongue's cheek in a

passionate kiss. *"Dee! Ee dee!"* It nuzzled her breast.

Foxtongue grinned, but a sudden stab of pain from her stump turned the expression inside out.

A polite cough from the doorway made Ashura turn. It was Master Paragrat, one-time blacksmith, now warlock extraordinary and a fine physician. "I came as soon as I heard," he announced in a rich rural baritone. His firm, dimpled jaw was hidden by a false white beard, which he sported for reasons of tradition. His eyes were a glistening hazelnut. Over his symbol-strewn wizard's gown he wore an old leather apron. "I was setting up the fireworks for Jape Day." Ashura bowed and saw that the wizard's heavy boots were spattered with mud and flecks of grass from trudging the High Meadows.

"Aha! The limb, splendid." Paragrat drew himself up to his full height, stared imperiously at the leg, and uttered something in an outlandish tongue. The leg turned, blinking tiny primitive eyes placed just below the knee joint. It hopped down from the bed and stood before them. Paragrat knelt down and examined it. He raised his head and spoke to Foxtongue. "You're in luck, Missee; you're young, your flesh tends strongly towards life. Your leg'll live for at least another two days. But it's strong-willed, like a feral. It enjoys its independence, anyone can see that."

He studied the limb. "Let's see, it's already got itself a sense of balance, eyes, even a mouth, and a tongue." He sighed and shook his head. A mop of black hair fell across his eyes and he swept it away with a gnarled, full-muscled hand. "It's changed too much. I can't web your leg back on for you. Only Trimghoul the psychokine can do that. Of course," Paragrat's eyes sparkled and he added, chuckling, "you mightn't think that so bad…"

Ashura groaned and slumped down on the bed. Paragrat turned to him. "What's up?"

"Touch her belly, sir."

Foxtongue nodded assent and Paragrat pressed his hand to her flesh. His arm tensed. His eyes grew wide. "My arse is sore," he whimpered – a strange, fluting falsetto – "passing husks is… Wait!"

He pulled away abruptly and stared at Ashura. "This –" He coughed,

clearing his mouth of strangeness. "—is the third woman I've seen today with such a thing in her belly. What do you know of this?"

"They're chaffinch wards," Ashura said. "My master made them."

"And who might he be?"

"Urkhan."

Paragrat growled. "That wily old…what else do you know?"

"I know that Trimghoul stole the brain of Mother Lamprey, an oracle round these parts, and gave it to Urkhan."

"What?"

"To eat."

"No!" Paragrat seized his arm and pulled him from the bed. "Come on! We've no time to waste."

Ashura was out in the hall before he knew what was happening. "Take heart, Foxtongue!" he cried, and was then propelled at frightening speed down the steps of the Walking Eye tavern.

As they ran, Ashura panted out his story. Soon enough, the whole sordid chain of events had been recounted. Paragrat bounded up the stairs four at a time. Ashura couldn't match the countryman's speed, and caught up with him just as he struck the door with a blow of his fist. Wood splintered and the door shuddered open with an agonized squeal. Ashura's eyes widened.

Urkhan stood by the window, resplendent in a low-cut blue ball gown. Pearls hung about his wrinkled neck. His thin lips were pasted with thick red gloss. His sunken cheeks were rouged. His large, waxy ears were pierced; a diamond-studded ring was clipped through his right nostril. He glanced at them and covered his mouth with his fingers. His liver-spotted hands were adorned with rings and bracelets.

The room was full of old tea chests. There was not a single loose article in the room. Ashura's master was on the move.

He giggled. "Oh, not more presents, surely, oh he is *such* a generous patron, oh, do thank him, what is it this time?"

"Thank whom?" asked Paragrat, sweetly. Ashura just stared.

"Oh, that dear, dear man – why *does* he wear such *silly* black drapery? He's such a *darling*. Tell him I'm coming, I'm coming, I'm all ready.

Where's the wagon, come, where's my coach?" Urkhan tottered towards them. His crabbed feet were strapped into ludicrous sequined, high-heeled bootees. A stiletto caught in the gap between two floorboards; he twisted his ankle and with a cry he fell into Ashura's arms.

"Oh, you sweet boy…"

Ashura's spine screamed. His eyeballs shivered and exploded. His groin bloomed with a thousand strange erections, and he was inside the ward of Mother Lamprey *and he saw a city, and it was GodGate, but not GodGate, and he saw people in the city, strangers, but somehow he recognized them, and he saw their lives, knew their friends, their likes and dislikes, their hurts and their fancies, and it was the whole story,* and when Paragrat pulled him away, Ashura wept himself to sleep at the loss of it.

When Ashura came to, he found a couple of hours had passed, and it was late afternoon. Urkhan was standing at the window, staring into the mellow, peach light. A beatific smile played upon his ragged, painted features.

Paragrat came and hunkered down beside the apprentice. "Urkhan's not strong enough to handle Mother Lamprey's ward properly," he said.

Ashura nodded, dumbly. Having touched it, he knew well the ward's power.

Paragrat flinched. "Ouch," he said.

A split second later Ashura felt it too, the fleeting passage of a little ward.

Ashura glanced round. "A chaffinch," he said.

"That's right. They come in through that window every minute or two. Guess where they go."

As if Paragrat's words were a cue, Urkhan stiffened and sighed.

Ashura stared and pointed with a shaking hand. "In…into *him?"*

"And now they're talking to each other," Paragrat finished for him. "The chaffinches are messengers. They talk to Mother Lamprey's *ka*. They tell her things. When I pulled Urkhan away from you – I sensed what they were doing, and I felt around for a while." He caught Ashura hurriedly wiping the tear stains from his cheeks. He grinned and hit the

boy playfully, and painfully, on the shoulder. "I don't blame you for getting upset, lad. No shame in it. Old Lamprey's powerful. She's putting together a prediction to end all predictions. She's putting the whole city inside Urkhan's head."

Ashura shuddered. "The city, it's…not quite GodGate."

Paragrat nodded. "It's a model. Unfinished. You know I told you I met other pregnant women with wards inside them today? Mother Lamprey's *ka* is using the chaffinches to talk to every unborn in the city." Paragrat's bony hand took Ashura's shoulder in a vice-like grip. Ashura gasped in pain. "It's like a hundred oracles put together," Paragrat went on. "Think of that computational power! Whoever owns that could be the despot of us all before the month's out!"

"You mean Urkhan?" Ashura queried through clenched teeth. He wondered how his arm would fare, once Paragrat had pulled it off.

Paragrat shook his head impatiently and released the boy's shoulder. "No, lad, Trimghoul! Urkhan went and made himself a ward from Mother Lamprey and told it to model the city. Now it's all too much for him to handle. Look at him! His identity is all in a muddle, and I reckon Trimghoul's taking advantage of him. Maybe he even planned it that way. You heard what Urkhan said before he fell on you? If Urkhan cleaves to that man's side, we'll never hear more of him, and Trimghoul will have his own private key to the city's future! The town's womenfolk will be for ever falling into fainting fits like wasps in October, and that damn pet-maker will have us all in his power!"

There was a clatter of horses' hooves outside the window. Urkhan peered down. He gave a little jump and whooped with delight.

"I'm coming! I'm coming, my love! Where shall we honeymoon? The Blue Mist Mountains or the Elysian coast? Oh, let it be the coast! We shall run barefoot across the bay and press our cheeks close to share the ocean-whisper of conch-shells! We shall tongue whelks drenched in lemon mouth-to-mouth as the sun draws down the jewelled night!" Urkhan performed a little dance, forgot about the shoes again and plummeted to the floor in a cacophony of jewellery. "Bugger!"

"Quick!" Paragrat cried, and leapt to his feet, dragging Ashura with him. "We mustn't be found here!" They scrambled down the stairs

and out the back way, through the yard and into the alley.

"We'll meet at the Walking Eye," said Paragrat, "and plot our campaign. You go on. I have things to see to first."

Ashura nodded, still breathless from their flight, and set off down the road.

By mid-evening, half the district was packed into the inn. Master Paragrat sat by the serving hatch. A sympathetic serving wench kept a pewter tankard filled with mead for him. He drank in quick, desperate gulps, without pleasure. His great, tousled head was hung in shame. "Nothing," he slurred. "Not one cursed thing I can do." At his feet were the books he had brought with him to study – manuals of arcane lore from which he had learned his craft – fine books scribed by wise men, but all of them inadequate to the task of ridding the city of a psychokine.

Earlier that evening, Paragrat had explained to Ashura and Mother Runnell what had proved to be an insurmountable problem.

"It's easy enough saying, 'spell Trimghoul,' but no spell is instantaneous. Think: he can move things at will, can make them vanish – *pfut!* – or change them. As soon as he knows there's something up, he can rid himself of the source of enchantment. Meaning me. No, thank you. If on the other hand we use brute force, then I think we're all agreed Trimghoul is a spiteful shit. If you attacked him in sufficient numbers, and he knew he was finished, he wouldn't waste his limited powers on himself, oh no, he'd take those responsible with him to hell. He'd kill the city's oracles, most probably. And he may kill *you,* too," he said turning to Ashura, "or someone close to you. Foxtongue, say. Think about it."

Ashura thought about it. He didn't stop thinking about it.

Hours had passed since then. The inn was filled with disgruntled men and women. More and more of those women had to be helped into the back room, faint and ill from the attentions of Urkhan's chaffinch wards, and the men's tempers grew hot.

Mother Runnell sat atop the oak bar, turning her head this way and that, holding down the ugly mood of the place with an imperious frown.

At last, the events of the day – and most of all this senseless, brooding inaction – broke Ashura's patience. He left the inn, and while he walked towards his garret he racked his brains for some stratagem. Paragrat was right. Conventional magic was out of the question. And you couldn't attack Trimghoul with brute force, either – he'd only kill innocents in his spite. Nor could you exactly sneak in to his house with a thin blade; at the first sight, or even snick, of a blade or wire or poison or anything else, he could remove it with barely conscious effort. Then woe betide the assassin!

Ashura glanced in at the shop windows as he walked. They were gaily decorated for Jape Day; it slowly dawned upon him that the yearly festival of tricks and cheats was but a night away. The garlands and brightly coloured paper decorations strewn across the street seemed out of place now and only depressed him further. He passed a shop. It was still open, and children were busy buying jokes and masks. He looked in at the articles on display. Fake spiders, beast costumes, rattles, waterguns…

He walked on, ran his fingers through his crudely shaved hair… and stopped dead. A strangled sound escaped his lips. He turned and retraced his steps.

"So that's the plan," he told Foxtongue, back at the Walking Eye. "It's ugly, it's degrading, and I've no right to ask you to do it. But if you're willing…"

Foxtongue gave him a sad sort of smile. She was sitting up in bed fully dressed, cuddling her leg. It purred contentedly and flexed.

The pain in her stump had lessened considerably and she was properly awake – and disturbed by the news from the inn.

"Your magic," she said. "You're certain of it?"

Ashura shook his head. "I haven't come across a better idea, that's all."

"Then that's good enough for me."

Ashura's heart was in his throat. "Are you sure – I mean – "

"Give me the potion, Warlock." She winked at him.

"Dee dee ee!" sang the leg.

Ashura handed her the little jar and turned to Culpole. "Get Paragrat

to sober up, and once Foxtongue and I are back – " Ashura surreptitiously tapped the wood of the bedframe for luck – "wake a councillor or two and go pick Urkhan up from the mansion."

Culpole nodded. "Off you go then. I'll be waiting for you. And Ashura – all the luck of the city, my friend." They embraced.

Ashura and Foxtongue stood on the hill overlooking Trimghoul's mansion. Ashura shifted the haversack on his back so its occupant couldn't kick him so hard, and took the jar from Foxtongue's palm. "Remember," he said, demonstrating the workings of the jar as he spoke, "take the lid off and give Trimghoul the bracelet. You think that's the kind of payment he expects, and you're abashed when he tells you different – "

"Because I'm new to the town, yes. I'm not acquainted with that kind of thing." She put on a ludicrous rustic accent. "I'm just a poor serving maid up from the country, sire."

"Wait till he has fallen asleep. Then unclip the false bottom. I've jammed it with a little wax, see? So it won't spring up too hard. Sprinkle the stuff on the sheets and leave. Don't turn round, don't look back, and don't stop running." He pressed the clip back, screwed the top back on, and slipped the jar back into the pocket of her cloak.

Foxtongue put her crutches to the ground and embraced him. "You know," she said. "I'll think of you when I bed him, all the time. Promise."

They kissed.

"I wonder what will happen to your little master," she mused, "when this is all over." Her implicit faith in his magic made Ashura's heart swell to bursting with anxiety. He shrugged, feigning a confidence equal to her own. "It takes time, but wards can be freed. Paragrat'll manage, and Mother Lamprey will rest at last. As for Urkhan – " Ashura shuddered. "Let the townsfolk decide. Come now. Don't forget your story. I love you." He helped her with the rucksack.

She pecked him on the cheek and set off down the path.

Ashura trembled with love and fear.

He waited one tortuous hour. He was sending Foxtongue into danger, he knew. Though his wit had thought up the stratagem, he could not be

the one to carry it out; that hurt. If anything went wrong, he knew, he would never forgive himself. The most exquisite hurt Trimghoul could then render him, was to let him go on living.

He looked up at the stars – it had turned midnight; it was Jape Day! – and walked down the path round to the back of the house. There was always a watchman on the front gate, but Trimghoul's mansion was no fortress – it did not have to be – and Ashura's ascent of the fence went unwitnessed. He loped across the new-cut lawn to the back wall. Somewhere in the house, Urkhan was concealed, his tortured mind twisted into the shape of a future GodGate, a model well worth the attentions of a rich and unscrupulous man. Ashura wondered for a moment how his old master was faring, but other, more pressing concerns soon drove Urkhan from his mind.

To his right he heard a young woman's gasp, a hint of a scream cut short – not a scream of pain. He scowled. There must be more to Trimghoul's success with women than met the casual eye.

He moved towards the sound of panting, and looked up. There, the window above him. Trimghoul's bedroom? He supposed so. It sounded like Foxtongue's voice. To his considerable relief, things fell silent then. There was a slight pop, a faint flash of ruby light, and he knew that Foxtongue's leg was back, in its proper form, seamlessly joined to her silken thigh.

Still he waited. Maybe half an hour later he heard someone stir in the room – and a voice, Trimghoul's, Foxtongue's reply. Ashura bit his lip till he drew blood. It was going wrong, he could sense it.

No, Foxtongue had managed, somehow, not to arouse suspicion. Again the sounds of Foxtongue at climax. Again blood rushed to Ashura's face at the thought of it.

Silence. Long silence.

She's gone to sleep, he said to himself, she's gone to sleep and she's forgotten what she's there for!

No. Again, footsteps, the rustling of covers.

Nothing.

Where was she?

A faint glow to the room. A sharp intake of breath.

The glow became more fierce. Then the screaming started.

Foxtongue's.

Then Trimghoul's.

The window shattered. Blood and fragments showered down on the cringing Ashura.

He straightened up. In a pool of glass a flayed mound of flesh, bone and intestine gibbered and shook. A hand rose, glowing, shedding nerve and artery in a shower of sparks and fluid. It fell to the ground. Trimghoul, or what was left of him, lay still.

Foxtongue leaned out the window. Her cheeks were wet. She was shivering. There was a look of fear in her eyes.

"God, Ashura, what did you do to him?"

Ashura was shaking, too. "Come down and I'll explain."

"I don't think I trust you, Ashura. You've learned black arts for sure."

And all of a sudden Ashura was laughing. "Oh, yes, black arts. Of course." He began to giggle hysterically.

Mystified, Foxtongue climbed down from the window and stood – on two legs – beside him. She frowned. "Let me in on the joke, Ashura, or lose me forever. I won't part my thighs for necromancers. Not again. Ever. That includes you, it seems."

Ashura tried, with no great success, to sober up. "Have you ever wondered at Trimghoul's costume? Or why his windows were always sealed? I mean, when Trimghoul swats away a fly with his mind, he takes off a patch of skin as well! That's the weakness! It was staring us in the face all along! He had power, for sure, but deep down it was all out of control…"

She took him by the lapels, pushed him against the wall, and breathed menacingly into his face. *"What was in the pot, Ashura?"*

Ashura grinned. "Itching powder," he replied. "What better start to Jape Day?"

He slipped his arm round her waist. "Now, why don't we go back to Mother Runnell's and I'll explain everything…"

The Neglected Garden

KATHE KOJA

"I DON'T WANT TO GO," she said. "I'm not going."

Patient and calm, the way he wanted to be, he explained again; they had discussed it, she was moving out. He had already packed her things for her, five big cardboard boxes, labeled, he had done the best he could. Clothes on hangers and her big Klee print wrapped and tied carefully across with string, everything neatly stacked in the car, here, he said, here's the keys.

"I don't want the car," she said. Tears ran down her face but she made no crying sounds, her breathing did not change, in fact her expression did not change. She stood there staring at him with rolling tears and her hands empty, palms upwards, at her sides. He kissed her, a little impatiently, on her mouth.

"You have to go," he said. "Please, Anne, we've gone all through this. Let's not make it any harder than it already is," although in fact it wasn't all that hard, not for him anyway. "Please," and he leaned forward but did not kiss her again; her lips were unpleasantly wet.

She stared at him, saying nothing. He began to feel more than impatient, angry in fact, but no, he would say nothing too, he would give as good as he got. He put her car keys in her hand, literally closing her fingers around them, and picking up his own keys left the house. An hour or so, he would come back and she would be gone.

When he got back her car was still in the driveway, but she was nowhere in the house, not upstairs, not in the utility room; nowhere. Feeling a little silly, he looked in the closets, even considered looking

under the bed; nothing. "Anne," calling her, louder and louder, "Anne, stop it, where are you," walking through the house and a movement, something in the backyard, caught his eye through the big kitchen windows. Letting the screen door slam, hard, walking fast and then seeing her, stopping as if on the perilous lip of a fire.

She was on the fence. The back fence, old now and leaning, half its braces gone. She sat at the spot where the rotted wood ended and the bare fencing began, legs straight out, head tipped just slightly to the right. Her arms were spread in a loose posture of crucifixion, and through the flesh of her wrists she had somehow pierced the rusty wire of the fence, threading it around the tendons, the blood rich and thick and bright like some strange new food and while he stood there staring and staring a fly settled down on the blood and walked around in it, back and forth.

He kept staring at the fly, it was suddenly so hot in the yard, it was as if he couldn't see, or could see only half of the scene before him, a kind of dazzle around the perimeters of his vision like the beginning of a fainting fit and back and forth went the fly, busy little black feet and he screamed, "Son of a *bitch!"* and moved to slap the fly away, and as his hand touched the wound she gave a very small sound, and he pulled his hand back and saw the blood on it.

He said something to her, something about my God Anne what the hell and she opened her eyes and looked at him in a slow considering kind of way, but with a certain blankness as if she viewed him now from a new perspective, and another fly landed and more hesitantly he brushed that one away, and still she did not speak at all.

"You have to go to the hospital," he told her. "You're bleeding, it's dangerous to bleed that way."

She ignored him by closing her eyes. Ants were walking over her bare feet. She didn't seem to feel them. "Anne," loudly, "I'm calling an ambulance, I'm calling the police, Anne."

The police were not helpful. He would have to press charges, they said, trespass charges against her to have her removed. They became more interested when he started to explain, in vague halting phrases, exactly how she was attached to his fence, and in sudden nervous fear he

hung up, perhaps they would think he had done it to her himself, who knew what Anne might tell them, she was obviously crazy, to do that to herself she would have to be crazy. He looked out the kitchen window and saw her looking at the house, her eyes tracking as he moved slowly past the windows. He didn't know what to do. He sat in the living room and tried to think.

By the time the sun went down he still had no idea what course to take. He did not even want to go back outside but he did, stood looking down at her. "Do you want some water? Or some aspirin or something?" and in the same breath enraged by what he had just said, the extreme and dangerous stupidity of the whole situation, he shouted at her, called her a stupid fucking idiot and walked back inside, shaking, shaking in his legs and knees and inside his body, felt his heart pounding, it was hard to breathe. She had to be in pain. Was she so crazy she didn't even feel pain anymore? Maybe it was a temporary thing, temporary insanity, maybe a night spent outside would shock her out of it, a night sitting on the cold ground.

In the morning she was still there, although she had stopped bleeding. Ants walked up and down her legs. The blood at her wrists had clotted to jelly. The skin of her face was very white.

"Anne," he said, and shook his head. Her hair was damp, parts of it tangled in the fence, and the pulse in her throat beat so he could see it, a sluggish throb. He felt sorry for her, he hated her. He wanted her to just get up and go away. "Anne, please, you're not doing yourself any good, this is hurting you," and the look she gave him then was so pointed that he felt his skin flush, he refused to say anything, he turned and went back into the house.

Someone was knocking at his front door: the woman from next door, Barbara something, joined by the paperboy's mother whose name he could not remember. They were shrill, demanding to know what he was going to do about that poor woman out there and my God this and that and he shouted at them from the depths of his confusion and anger, told them to get the hell off his porch and he had already been in contact with the police if that would satisfy them, thank you very much, it's none of your business to start with. When they had gone he sat down,

he felt very dizzy all of a sudden, he felt as if he had to sit down for a while, a good long while.

How, he didn't know, but he fell asleep, there in the chair, woke with his shirt collar sticking to his neck, sweat on his forehead and above his upper lip. He felt chilled. As he went into the kitchen to get something warm to drink his gaze went to the windows, it was irresistible, he had to look.

She was still there, slumped back against the fence, a curve in her arms and back that curiously suggested tension. She saw him; he knew it by the way her body moved, just a little, as his cautious figure came into view. He ducked away, then felt embarrassed somehow, as if he had been caught peeping in a window, then angry at himself and almost instantly at her.

Let her sit, he said to himself. We'll see who gets tired of this first.

It was almost ten days later that he called a doctor, a friend of his. Anne had not moved, he had barely gone near her, but even his cursory window inspections showed him things were changing, it was nothing he wanted to have to inspect. After much debate he called Richard, told him there was a medical situation at his house; his evasiveness puzzled Richard who said, "Look, if you have somebody sick there, you'd be better off getting her to a hospital. It is a her, isn't it?" Yes, he said. I just need you to come over here, he said, it's kind of a situation, you'll know what I mean when you see her.

Finally Richard arrived, and he directed him straight out to the backyard, stood watching from the window, drinking a glass of ice water. Richard was back in less than five minutes, his face red. He slammed the screen door hard behind him.

"I don't know what the hell's going on here," Richard said, "but I'll tell you one thing, that woman out there is in bad shape, I mean bad shape. She's got an infection that – "

Well, he said, you're a doctor, right?

"I'm a gynecologist," and Richard was shouting now. "She belongs in a hospital. This is criminal, this is a criminal situation. That woman could die from this."

He drank a little of his ice water, a slow swallow, and Richard leaned forward and knocked the glass right out of his hand. "I said she could die from this, you asshole, and I'm also saying that if she does it's your fault."

"My fault? My fault, how can it be my fault when she's the one who –" but Richard was already leaving, slamming back out the door, gone. The ice water lay in a glossy puddle on the chocolate-colored tile. He looked out the window. Her posture was unchanged.

It was a kind of dream, less nightmare than sensation of almost painful confusion, and he woke from it sweaty, scared a little, sat up to turn on the bedside lamp. It was almost three. He put on a pair of khaki jeans and walked barefoot into the backyard, the flashlight set on dim, a wavering oval of pale yellow light across the grass.

Perhaps she was asleep.

He leaned closer, not wanting to come too close but wanting to see, and flicked the light at her face.

Moths were walking across her forehead, pale as her skin, a luminous promenade. A small sound came from him as she opened her eyes. There was a moth beneath her right eyelid. It looked dead.

Her hair was braided into the fence, and the puffy circles of infection at her wrists had spread, a gentle bloat extending almost to her elbows. There was a slightly viscous shine to the original wounds. The old blood there had a rusty tinge. The grass seemed greener now, lapping at her bare feet and ankles. When he touched her with the light she seemed almost to feel it, for she turned her head, not away from the light as he expected but into it, as if it was warm and she was cold.

No doubt she was cold. If he touched her now –

He flicked the light to full power, a small brassy beam, played it up and down her body, nervously at first then with more confidence as she moved so little, so gently in its light. Her hair looked dark as a vine. There was dew on her clothing. He stood looking at her for it seemed to him a very long time, but when he returned to the house he saw it was barely quarter after three.

She kept on changing. The infection worsened and then apparently

stabilized; at least it spread no farther. Her arms, a landscape of green and pale brown, leaves and the supple wood of the creeping growth about her breasts and waist, her clothing paler and more tattered, softly stained by the days of exposure. Flowers were starting to sprout behind her head, strange white flowers like some distorted stylized nimbus, Our Lady of the Back Forty. Her feet were a permanent green. It seemed her toenails were gone.

None of the neighbors would talk to him now. His attempts at explanations, bizarre even to his own ears, turned them colder still. Each day after work he would look through the kitchen windows, each day he would find some new change, minute perhaps but recognizable. It occurred to him that he was paying her more attention than ever now, and in a moment of higher anger he threw a tarp over her, big and blue and plastic, remnant of boating days. It smelled. He didn't care. She smelled too, didn't she? He covered her entirely, to the tips of her green toes, left her there. He was no more than twenty steps away when the rustling started, louder and louder, the whole tarp shaking as if by a growing wind; it was horrible to watch, horrible to listen to and angrier still he snatched it away, looked down at her closed eyes and the spiderweb in her ear. As he stood there her mouth opened very slowly, it seemed she would speak. He looked closer and saw a large white flower growing in her mouth, its stem wound around her tongue which moved, feebly, as she tried to talk.

He slapped her, once, very hard. It was disgusting to look at her, he wanted to smother her with the tarp, but he was afraid to try it again. He couldn't bear that sound again, that terrible rustling sound like the rattling of cockroaches, God if there was only some way to kill her fast he would do it, he would do it right now.

The white flower wiggled. Another slowly unfurled like a time-lapse photo, bigger than the first. Its petals were a richer white, heavy like satin. It brushed against her lower lip, and her mouth hung slightly open to accommodate its weight; it looked like she was pouting, a parody of a pout.

He threw the tarp away. He pulled down the blinds in the kitchen and refused to check on her after work. He tried to think, again, what to

do, lay in bed at night hoping something would somehow do it for him. After a particularly heavy rain, during which he sat up all night, almost chuckling in the stern sound of the downpour, he rushed out first thing in the morning to see how she'd liked her little bath. He found her feet had completely disappeared into the grass, her hair gone into vines with leaves the size of fists, her open mouth a garden. She was lush with growth. He felt a sick and bitter disappointment, with childish spite wrenched one of the flowers from her mouth and ground it into the grass where her feet had been. Even as he stood there the grass crept a discernible distance forward.

Grass, all of it growing too high around her. Well when the grass gets too high you cut it, right, that's what you do, you cut it and he was laughing a little, it was simple. A simple idea and he started up the mower, it took a few tries but he started it. A left turn from the garage, walking past the driveway with a happy stride, pushing the mower before him, growling sound of the mower a comfort in his ears and all at once the ground trembled, was it the mower's vibration? It trembled again, harder this time, no earthquakes here, what the hell and it happened again, more strongly, over and over until the grass moved like water, choppy undulating waves that gained and climbed until he stumbled beneath their force and lost his footing entirely, fell down and saw with a shout of fear that the mower was still on, was growling at him now, the waves of grass aiming it towards him. He rolled away, a clumsy scramble to stand again, half-crawled to the safety of the still driveway. As soon as his feet left the grass the waves stopped. The mower's automatic cut-off shut it down. He was crying and couldn't help it.

"What do you want," screaming at her, tears on his lips, "what do you *want,"* oh this is the last straw, this is enough. No more.

Back to the garage, looking for the weed killer, the Ortho stuff he'd used before, herbicide, and the term struck him and he laughed, a hard barking laugh. He had trouble attaching the sprayer, the screw wouldn't catch and he struggled with it, the hastily mixed solution, too strong, splashing on his skin, stinging where it splashed. Finally in his heat he threw the sprayer down, the hell with it, he would just pour it on her, pour it all over her.

Walking fast across the grass, before she could catch on, before she could start up, hurrying and the solution jiggling and bubbling in the bottle. "Are you thirsty?" too loudly, "are you thirsty, Anne, are you – " and he threw it at her, bottle and all, as hard as he could. And stepped back, breathing dryly through his mouth, to watch.

At first nothing seemed to be happening; only her eyes, opening very wide, the eyes of someone surprised by great pain. Then on each spot where the solution had struck the foliage began not to wither but to blacken, not the color of death but an eerily sumptuous shade, and in one instant every flower in her mouth turned black, a fierce and luminous black and her eyes were black too, her lips, her hands black as slowly she separated herself from the fence, dragging half of it with her, rising to a shambling crouch and her tongue free and whipping like a snake as he turned, much too slowly, it was as if his disbelief impeded him, turning back to see in an instant's glance that black black tongue come crawling across the grass, and she behind it with a smile.

A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing

THOMAS LIGOTTI

LONG BEFORE I SUSPECTED the existence of the town near the northern border, I believe that I was in some way already an inhabitant of that remote and desolate place. Any number of signs might be offered to support this claim, although some of them may seem somewhat removed from the issue. Not the least of them appeared during my childhood, those soft gray years when I was stricken with one sort or another of life-draining infirmity. It was at this early stage of development that I sealed my deep affinity with the winter season in all its phases and manifestations. Nothing seemed more natural to me than my impulse to follow the path of the snow-topped roof and the ice-crowned fencepost, considering that I, too, in my illness, exhibited the marks of an essentially hibernal state of being. Under the plump blankets of my bed I lay freezing and pale, my temples sweating with shiny sickles of fever. Through the frosted panes of my bedroom window I watched in awful devotion as dull winter days were succeeded by blinding winter nights. I remained ever awake to the possibility, as my young mind conceived it, of an "icy transcendence." I was therefore cautious, even in my frequent states of delirium, never to indulge in a vulgar sleep, except perhaps to dream my way deeper into that landscape where vanishing winds snatched me up into the void of an ultimate hibernation.

No one expected I would live very long, not even my attending physician, Dr. Zirk. A widower far along into middle age, the doctor seemed intensely dedicated to the well-being of the living anatomies under his care. Yet from my earliest acquaintance with him I sensed that he

too had a secret affinity with the most remote and desolate locus of the winter spirit, and therefore was also allied with the town near the northern border. Every time he examined me at my bedside he betrayed himself as a fellow fanatic of a disconsolate creed, embodying so many of its stigmata and gestures. His wiry, white-streaked hair and beard were thinning, patchy remnants of a former luxuriance, much like the bare, frost-covered branches of the trees outside my window. His face was of a coarse complexion, rugged as frozen earth, while his eyes were overcast with the cloudy ether of a December afternoon. And his fingers felt so frigid as they palpated my neck or gently pulled at the underlids of my eyes.

One day, when I believe that he thought I was asleep, Dr. Zirk revealed the extent of his initiation into the barren mysteries of the winter world, even if he spoke only in the cryptic fragments of an overworked soul in extremis. In a voice as pure and cold as an arctic wind the doctor made reference to "undergoing certain ordeals," as well as speaking of what he called "grotesque discontinuities in the order of things." His trembling words also invoked an epistemology of "hope and horror," of exposing once and for all the true nature of this "great gray ritual of existence" and plunging headlong into an "enlightenment of inanity." It seemed that he was addressing me directly when in a soft gasp of desperation he said, "To make an end of it, little puppet, in your own way. To close the door in one swift motion and not by slow, fretful degrees. If only this doctor could show you the way of such cold deliverance." I felt my eyelashes flutter at the tone and import of these words, and Dr. Zirk immediately became silent. Just then my mother entered the room, allowing me a pretext to display an aroused consciousness. But I never betrayed the confidence or indiscretion the doctor had entrusted to me that day.

In any case, it was many years later that I first discovered the town near the northern border, and there I came to understand the source and significance of Dr. Zirk's mumblings on that nearly silent winter day. I noticed, as I arrived in the town, how close a resemblance it bore to the winterland of my childhood, even if the precise time of year was still slightly out of season. On that day, everything – the streets of the

town and the few people travelling upon them, the store windows and the meager merchandise they displayed, the weightless pieces of debris barely animated by a half-dead wind – everything looked as if it had been drained entirely of all color, as if an enormous photographic flash had just gone off in the startled face of the town. And somehow beneath this pallid facade I intuited what I described to myself as the "all pervasive aura of a place that has offered itself as a haven for an interminable series of delirious events."

It was definitely a mood of delirium that appeared to rule the scene, causing all that I saw to shimmer vaguely in my sight, as if viewed through the gauzy glow of a sick room: a haziness that had no precise substance, distorting without in any way obscuring the objects behind or within it. There was an atmosphere of disorder and commotion that I sensed in the streets of the town, as if its delirious mood were only a soft prelude to great pandemonium. I heard the sound of something that I could not identify, an approaching racket that caused me to take refuge in a narrow passageway between a pair of high buildings. Nestled in this dark hiding place I watched the street and listened as that nameless clattering grew louder. It was a medley of clanging and creaking, of groaning and croaking, a dull jangle of something unknown as it groped its way through the town, a chaotic parade in honor of some special occasion of delirium.

The street that I saw beyond the narrow opening between the two buildings was now entirely empty. The only thing I could glimpse was a blur of high and low structures which appeared to quiver slightly as the noise became louder and louder, the parade closing in, though from which direction I did not know. The formless clamor seemed to envelop everything around me, and then suddenly I could see a passing figure in the street. Dressed in loose white garments, it had an egg-shaped head that was completely hairless and as white as paste, a clown of some kind who moved in a way that was both casual and laborious, as if it were strolling underwater or against a strong wind, tracing strange patterns in the air with billowed arms and pale hands. It seemed to take forever for this apparition to pass from view, but just before doing so it turned to peer into the narrow passage where I had secreted myself, and its

greasy white face was wearing an expression of bland malevolence.

Others followed the lead figure, including a team of ragged men who were harnessed like beasts and pulled long bristling ropes. They also moved out of sight, leaving the ropes to waver slackly behind them. The vehicle to which these ropes were attached – by means of enormous hooks – rolled into the scene, its great wooden wheels audibly grinding the pavement of the street beneath them. It was a sort of platform with huge wooden stakes rising from its perimeter to form the bars of a cage. There was nothing to secure the wooden bars at the top, and so they wobbled with the movement of the parade.

Hanging from the bars, and rattling against them, was an array of objects haphazardly tethered by cords and wires and straps of various kinds. I saw masks and shoes, household utensils and naked dolls, large bleached bones and the skeletons of small animals, bottles of colored glass, the head of a dog with a rusty chain wrapped several times around its neck, and sundry scraps of debris and other things I could not name, all knocking together in a wild percussion. I watched and listened as that ludicrous vehicle passed by in the street. Nothing else followed it, and the enigmatic parade seemed to be at an end, now only a delirious noise fading into the distance. Then a voice called out behind me.

"What are you doing back here?"

I turned around and saw a fat old woman moving toward me from the shadows of that narrow passageway between the two high buildings. She was wearing a highly decorated hat that was almost as wide as she was, and her already ample form was augmented by numerous layers of colorful scarves and shawls. Her body was further weighted down by several necklaces which hung like a noose around her neck and many bracelets about both of her chubby wrists. On the thick fingers of either hand were a variety of large gaudy rings.

"I was watching the parade," I said to her. "But I couldn't see what was inside the cage, or whatever it was. It seemed to be empty."

The woman simply stared at me for some time, as if contemplating my face and perhaps surmising that I had only recently arrived in the northern border town. Then she introduced herself as Mrs. Glimm and said that she ran a lodging house. "Do you have a place to stay?" she

asked in an aggressively demanding tone. "It should be dark soon," she said, glancing slightly upwards. "The days are getting shorter and shorter."

I agreed to follow her back to the lodging house. On the way I asked her about the parade. "It's all just some nonsense," she said as we walked through the darkening streets of the town. "Have you seen one of these?" she asked, handing me a crumpled piece of paper that she had stuffed among her scarves and shawls.

Smoothing out the page Mrs. Glimm had placed in my hands, I tried to read in the dimming twilight what was printed upon it.

At the top of the page, in capital letters, was a title: METAPHYSICAL LECTURE I. Below these words was a brief text which I read to myself as I walked with Mrs. Glimm. "It has been said," the text began, "that after undergoing certain ordeals – whether ecstatic or abysmal – we should be obliged to change our names, as we are no longer who we once were. Instead the opposite rule is applied: our names linger long after anything resembling what we were, or thought we were, has disappeared entirely. Not that there was ever much to begin with – only a few questionable memories and impulses drifting about like snowflakes in a gray and endless winter. But each soon floats down and settles into a cold and nameless void."

After reading this brief "metaphysical lecture," I asked Mrs. Glimm where it came from. "They were all over town," she replied. "Just some nonsense, like the rest of it. Personally I think this sort of thing is bad for business. Why should I have to go around picking up customers in the street? But as long as someone's paying my price I will accommodate them in whatever style they wish. In addition to operating a lodging house or two, I am also licensed to act as an undertaker's assistant and a cabaret stage manager. Well, here we are. You can go inside – someone will be there to take care of you. At the moment I have an appointment elsewhere." With these concluding words, Mrs. Glimm walked off, her jewelry rattling with every step she took.

Mrs. Glimm's lodging house was one of several great structures along the street, each of them sharing similar features and all of them, I later discovered, in some way under the proprietorship or authority of the

same person – that is, Mrs. Glimm. Nearly flush with the street stood a series of high and almost styleless houses with institutional facades of pale gray mortar and enormous dark roofs. Although the street was rather wide, the sidewalks in front of the houses were so narrow that the roofs of these edifices slightly overhung the pavement below, creating a sense of tunnel-like enclosure. All of the houses might have been siblings of my childhood residence, which I once heard someone describe as an "architectural moan." I thought of this phrase as I went through the process of renting a room in Mrs. Glimm's lodging house, insisting that I be placed in one that faced the street. Once I was settled into my apartment, which was actually a single, quite expansive bedroom, I stood at the window gazing up and down the street of gray houses, which together seemed to form a procession of some kind, a frozen funeral parade. I repeated the words "architectural moan" over and over to myself until exhaustion forced me away from the window and under the musty blankets of the bed. Before I fell asleep I remembered that it was Dr. Zirk who used this phrase to describe my childhood home, a place that he had visited so often.

So it was of Dr. Zirk that I was thinking as I fell asleep in that expansive bedroom in Mrs. Glimm's lodging house. And I was thinking of him not only because he used the phrase "architectural moan" to describe the appearance of my childhood home, which so closely resembled those high-roofed structures along that street of gray houses in the northern border town, but also, and even primarily, because the words of the brief metaphysical lecture I had read some hours earlier reminded me so much of the words, those fragments and mutterings, that the doctor spoke as he sat upon my bed and attended to the life-draining infirmities from which everyone expected I would die at a very young age. Lying under the musty blankets of my bed in that strange lodging house, with a little moonlight shining through the window to illuminate the dreamlike vastness of the room around me, I once again felt the weight of someone sitting upon my bed and bending over my apparently sleeping body, ministering to it with unseen gestures and a soft voice. It was then, while pretending to be asleep as I used to do in my childhood, that I heard the words of a second "metaphysical lec-

ture." They were whispered in a slow and resonant monotone.

"We should give thanks," the voice said to me, "that a poverty of knowledge has so narrowed our vision of things as to allow the possibility of feeling something about them. How could we find a pretext to react to anything if we understood…everything? None but an absent mind was ever victimized by the adventure of intense emotional feeling. And without the suspense that is generated by our benighted state – our status as beings possessed by our own bodies and the madness that goes along with them – who could take enough interest in the universal spectacle to bring forth even the feeblest yawn, let alone exhibit the more dramatic manifestations which lend such unwonted color to a world that is essentially composed of shades of gray upon a background of blackness. Hope and horror, to repeat merely two of the innumerable conditions dependent on a faulty insight, would be much the worse for an ultimate revelation that would expose their lack of necessity. At the other extreme, both our most dire and most exalted emotions are well served every time we take some ray of knowledge, isolate it from the spectrum of illumination, and then forget it completely. All our ecstasies, whether sacred or from the slime, depend on our refusal to be schooled in even the most superficial truths and our maddening will to follow the path of forgetfulness. Amnesia may well be the highest sacrament in the great gray ritual of existence. To know, to understand in the fullest sense, is to plunge into an enlightenment of inanity, a wintry landscape of memory whose substance is all shadows and a profound awareness of the infinite spaces surrounding us on all sides. Within this space we remain suspended only with the aid of strings that quiver with our hopes and our horrors, and which keep us dangling over the gray void. How is it that we can defend such puppetry, condemning any efforts to strip us of these strings? The reason, one must suppose, is that nothing is more enticing, nothing more vitally idiotic, than our desire to have a name – even if it is the name of a stupid little puppet – and to hold on to this name throughout the long ordeal of our lives as if we could hold on to it forever. If only we could keep those precious strings from growing frayed and tangled, if only we could keep from falling into an empty sky, we might continue to pass ourselves off under

our assumed names and perpetuate our puppet's dance throughout all eternity..."

The voice whispered more words than this, more than I can recall, as if it would deliver its lecture without end. But at some point I drifted off to sleep as I had never slept before, calm and gray and dreamless.

The next morning I was awakened by some noise down in the street outside my window. It was the same delirious cacophony I had heard the day before when I first arrived in the northern border town and witnessed the passing of that unique parade. But when I got up from my bed and went to the window, I saw no sign of the uproarious procession. Then I noticed the house directly opposite the one in which I had spent the night. One of the highest windows of that house across the street was fully open, and slightly below the ledge of the window, lying against the gray facade of the house, was the body of a man hanging by his neck from a thick white rope. The cord was stretched taut and led back through the window and into the house. For some reason this sight did not seem in any way unexpected or out of place, even as the noisy thrumming of the unseen parade grew increasingly louder and even when I recognized the figure of the hanged man, who was extremely slight of build, almost like a child in physical stature. Although many years older than when I had last seen him, his hair and beard now radiantly white, clearly the body was that of my old physician, Dr. Zirk.

Now I could see the parade approaching. From the far end of the gray, tunnel-like street, the clown creature strolled in its loose white garments, his egg-shaped head scanning the high houses on either side. As the creature passed beneath my window it looked up at me for a moment with that same expression of bland malevolence, and then passed on. Following this figure was the formation of ragged men harnessed by ropes to a cagelike vehicle that rolled along on wooden wheels. Countless objects, many more than I saw the previous day, clattered against the bars of the cage. The grotesque inventory now included bottles of pills that rattled with the contents inside them, shining scalpels and instruments for cutting through bones, needles and syringes strung together and hung like ornaments on a Christmas tree, and a stethoscope that had been looped about the decapitated dog's head.

The wooden stakes of the caged platform wobbled to the point of breaking with the additional weight of this cast-off clutter. Because there was no roof covering this cage, I could see down into it from my window. But there was nothing inside, at least for the moment. As the vehicle passed directly below, I looked across the street at the hanged man and the thick rope from which he dangled like a puppet. From the shadows inside the open window of the house, a hand appeared that was holding a polished steel straight razor. The fingers of that hand were thick and wore many gaudy rings. After the razor had worked at the cord for a few moments, the body of Dr. Zirk fell from the heights of the gray house and landed in the open vehicle just as it passed by. The procession which was so lethargic in its every aspect now seemed to disappear quickly from view, its muffled riot of sounds fading into the distance.

To make an end of it, I thought to myself—*to make an end of it in whatever style you wish.*

I looked at the house across the street. The window that was once open was now closed, and the curtains behind it were drawn. The tunnel-like street of gray houses was absolutely quiet and absolutely still. Then, as if in answer to my own deepest wish, a sparse showering of snowflakes began to descend from the gray morning sky, each one of them a soft whispering voice. For the longest time I continued to stare out from my window, gazing upon the street and the town that I knew was my home.

EVIDENCE

Jack

CHINA MIÉVILLE

NOW THAT THINGS have gone the way they have, everyone's got a story. Everyone'll tell you how they or their friend, which you can see in the way they say it they want you to think means them, knew Jack. Maybe even how they helped him, how they were part of his schemes. Mostly though of course they know that's too much and it'll just be how they or their friend was there one time and saw him running over the roofs, money flying from his swag-bags, militia trying and failing to track him down below. That sort of thing. *My mate saw Jack Half-a-Prayer once*, they'll say, *just for a moment*. As if they're being modest.

It's supposed to be respect. They reckon they're showing their respect, with everything that's happened. They ain't, of course. They're like dogs on his corpse and they disgust me.

I tell you that so you know where I'm coming from. Because I know how what I'm about to say might sound. I want you to know where I'm coming from when I tell you that I *did* know Jack. I did.

I worked with him.

I was lowly, don't get me wrong, but I was part of the whole thing. And please don't think I'm talking myself up, but I swear to you I ain't being arrogant. I'm nothing important, but the work I did, in a little way, was crucial to him. That's all I'm saying. So. So you can understand that I was pretty interested when I heard we'd got our hands on the man who sold Jack out. That would be one way of putting it. That would be mild. I made it my business to meet him, let's put it that way.

*

I remember the first time I heard what Jack was up to, after he escaped. He was daring enough that he got noticed. *Did you hear about that Remade done that robbery?* someone said to me in a pub. I was careful, couldn't show any reaction.

I'd felt something when I met Jack, you know? I respected him. He wasn't boastful, but he had a fire in him. Even so, I couldn't be sure he'd come to anything.

That first job, he got away with hundreds of nobles and gave it away on the streets. He scored himself the love of the Dog Fenn poor that way. That was what had people all excited, told them he was something else than your average gangster. He weren't the first to do that, but he was one of few.

What got me wasn't so much what he did with the money as where he stole it from. It was a government office. Where they store taxes.

Everyone knows what the security on those places is like. And I knew that there was no way he'd have done something like that without it being a *screw you*. He was making a point, and my good bloody gods but I admired that.

It was then, in that pub, when I realised what he'd done, how he must have made that night-raid work, how he must have climbed and crept and fought his way in, with his new body, how he must have been able to vanish, weighed down with specie, that I realised he was something. That was when I knew that Jack Half-a-Prayer was no ordinary Remade, and no ordinary renegade.

Not many people see the Remade like I do, or like Jack did.

You know it's true. To most of you they're to be ignored or used. If you really *notice* them you wish you hadn't. It wasn't like that for Jack, and not just because he *was* Remade. I bet – I know – that Jack used to notice them, see them clear, before anything was done to him. And that's the same for me.

People walk along and see nothing but trash, Remade trash with bodies all wrong, shat out by the punishment factories. Well, I don't want to be too sentimental about it but I've no doubts at all that Jack'd have seen this *woman* – whose hands yes were gone and been replaced

with little birds' wings – and he'd have seen an *old man,* not the sexless thing he'd been made into, and a young lad with eyes gone and in their place an array of dark glass and pipework and lights and the boy stumbling trying to see in ways he weren't born to but still a boy. Jack'd see people changed with engines in steam, and oily gears, and the parts of animals, and their innards or their skin altered with hexes, and all those things, but he'd have seen *them* under the punishment.

People get broken when they get Remade. I've seen it so many times. Suddenly, take a wrong turn by the law and it ain't just the physical punishment, it ain't just the new limbs or metal or the change in the body, it's that they wake up and they're *Remade,* the same as they spat on or ignored for years. They know they're nothing.

Jack, when it was done to him, never thought he was nothing. He'd never thought any of them were.

There was this one time. A foundry in Smog Bend, and there was a man there, some middling supervisor – this was years after Jack got free, and I only heard all this – who was causing trouble. Informing on guilders trying to recruit. There was gangs following organisers home, and scaring them so they'd not come back, or maybe retiring them permanently.

I'm not clear on the details. But the point is what Jack done.

One day the workers troop in and they take their places by the gears, but there's no klaxon. And they're waiting, but nothing happens. Now they're getting wary, they're getting very antsy. They know it's that overseer who's due in that day, so they're nervous, they ain't talking much, but they go looking. And there at the foot of the steps up to the office, there's an arrow put together out of tools. On the floor, pointing up.

So they creep up. And on the landing there's another. And there's a whole gang of men now, and they're following these arrows, soldered to the banisters, up on the walkway, trooping round the factory, until pretty much the whole workforce is up there, and they come to the end of the gangway, and there dangling is that supervisor.

He's unconscious. His mouth's all scabbed. It's sewn up, with wire.

People know right then and there what's happened, but when the

man wakes up and gets unstitched he starts raving, describing the man who done this to him, and then it's certain.

That man was lucky he didn't get killed, is my thinking. There was no more trouble there for a while, I hear. That changed things. I think they called that one Jack's Whispering Stitch. It's things like that make you see why people respected Jack Half-a-Prayer. Loved him.

This is the greatest city in the world. You hear that all the time, because it's true. But it's sort of an untrue truth, for a lot of us.

I don't know where you live. If it's Dog Fenn, then knowing that Parliament's a building like nothing else, or that we've riches in the coffers that would make the rest of the world jealous, or that the scholars of New Crobuzon could outthink the bloody gods – knowing all of that doesn't do so much. You still live in Dog Fenn, or Badside, or what have you.

But when Jack ran, the city was the greatest for Badside too.

You could see it – I could see it – in the way people walked, after Jack'd done something. I don't know how it was uptown in The Crow – I expect the well-dressed there sneered, or made a show of not caring – but where the houses lean in to each other, where the bricks shed pointing, in the shadow of the glass cactus ghetto, people walked tall. Jack was everyone's: men and women, cactus-people, khepri and vod. The wyrmen made up songs about him. The same people that would spit in the face of a Remade beggar cheered this fReemade. In Salacus Fields they'd toast Jack by name.

I wouldn't do that, of course – not that I didn't want to, but you can imagine, in the business I'm in, I have to be careful. I'm involved, so of course I can't be seen to be. In my head, though, I'd raise a glass with them. *To Jack,* I'd think.

In the short time I worked with Jack I never used his given name, nor he mine. It's in the nature of the work, obviously, that you don't use real names. But then, what could be more his name than Jack? Remaking is the ruin of most, but it was the making of him.

It's hard to make sense of Remaking, of its logic. Sometimes the

magisters pass down sentences that you can understand. One man kills another with a blade, take his killing arm and replace it, suture a motorknife in its place, tube him up with the boiler to run it. The lesson's obvious. Or those who are made heavy engines for industry, mancranes and woman-cabs and boy-machines. It's easy to see why the city would want them.

But I can't explain to you the woman given a ruff of peacock feathers, or the young lad with iron spiderlimbs out his back, or those with too many eyes or engines that make them burn from the inside out, or legs made of wooden toys or replaced with the arms of apes so they walk with mad monkey grace. The Remakings that make them stronger, or weaker, or more or less vulnerable, Remakings almost unnoticed, and those that make them impossible to understand.

Sometimes you'll see a xenian Remade, but it's rare. It's hard to work with cactacae vegetable flesh, or the physiognomy of vodyanoi, I'm told, and there are other reasons for the other races, so for the most part magisters'll sentence them to other things. For the most part, it's humans who are Remade, for cruelty or expediency, or opaque logics.

There ain't no one the city hates so much as the renegades, the fReemade. Turning your Remaking on the Remakers, that ain't how it's supposed to be.

Sometimes, you know, I'll admit it's frustrating, to have to keep all my thoughts to myself. Especially during the day, while I'm in at work. Don't get me wrong, I like my colleagues, some of them, they're good lads, and for all I know some would even agree with the way I look at things, but you just can't risk it. You have to know when to keep secrets.

So I stay well out of it. I don't talk politics, I just do what I'm told, stay well out of any discussions.

When you see, when you see how people looked up after Jack had struck, though, my gods. How could anyone not be for that? People needed him, they needed that, that release. That hope.

I couldn't believe it when I heard my crew'd got hold of the man who got Jack caught. I had to keep myself under control at work, not let anyone see I was excited. I was waiting to get my hands on the rat.

*

For a lot of people, the most exciting, the best thing he ever done was an escape. Not his first escape – that I can't help thinking would have been some tawdry affair. Impressive for all that but a desperate bloody crawl, his new Remaking still atwitch, all grimy, all stained by the grease of his shackles, and stonedust, lying in some haul of rubbish where the dogs couldn't smell him, till he was strong enough to run. That, I think, would have been as messy as any other birth. No, the escape I'm talking about was the one they call Jack's Steeplechase.

Even now people can't decide whether it was deliberate or not, whether he let it out to the militia that he'd be there, that he'd be stealing weapons from one of their caches, in the city centre, in Perdido Street Station, just so they'd come for him and he could show he could get away from them. Me I don't think he'd be so cocky. I think he just got caught, but being who he was, being what he was, he made the best of it.

He ran for more than an hour. You can go a long way in that time, over the roofs of New Crobuzon. Within fifteen minutes news had spread and I don't know how, I don't know how it is that the news of him running moved faster than he did himself, but that's the way of these things. Soon enough, as Jack Half-a-Prayer tore into view over some street, he'd find people waiting, and as far as they dared, cheering.

No I never saw it but you hear about it, all the time. People could see him on the roofs, waving his Remaking so people would know it was him. Behind him squads of militia. Falling, chasing, falling, more emerging from attics, from stairways, from all over, wearing their masks, pointing weapons, and firing them, and Jack leaping over chimneypots and launching himself from dormers, leaving them behind. Some people said he was laughing.

Bright daylight – militia visible in uniform. That's a thing in itself. He went by the Ribs, they say, even scrambled up the bones, though of course I don't believe that. But wherever he went, I see him sure-footed on the slates, a famous outlaw man by then, and behind him a wake of clodhopping militia, and streaks in the sky as they fire. Bullets, chakris from rivebows, spasms of black energy, ripples from the thaumaturges.

Jack avoided them all. When he shot back, with the weapons he'd just taken, experimental things, he took men down.

Airships came for him, and informer wyrmen: the skies were all fussy with them. But after an hour of that chase, Jack Half-a-Prayer was gone. Bloody magnificent.

The man who sold out Half-a-Prayer was nothing. You wonder, don't you, who could bring down the greatest bandit New Crobuzon's ever seen. A nonentity. A no one.

It was just luck, that was all. That was what took Jack Half-a-Prayer. He weren't outsmarted, he didn't get sloppy, he didn't try to go too far, nothing like that. He got unlucky. Some pissant little punk who knows someone who knows someone who knows one of Jack's informers, some young turd doing a job, whispered messages in pubs, passing on a package, I don't sodding know, some nothing at all, who puts it together, and not because he's smart but because he gets lucky, where Jack's hiding. I truly don't know. But I've seen him, and he's nothing.

I didn't know why he gave up Half-a-Prayer. I wondered if he thought he'd be rewarded. Turned out he'd have said nothing if they hadn't hauled him in. He'd been caught for his own little crimes – his own paltry, petty, pathetic misdemeanours – and he thought if he delivered Jack, the government would look after him, forgive him and keep him safe. Idiot man.

He thought the government would keep him out of our hands.

Most of what Jack did weren't so obviously dramatic, of course. It was the smaller, savager stuff that had them out for him.

It ain't that they were happy about the big swaggering thievery, the showings-off. But that ain't what made Jack a thorn they had to pluck.

No one knows how he got the information he did, but Jack could smell militia like a hound. No matter how good their cover. Informers, colonel-informers, intriguists, provocateurs, insiders and officers – Jack could find them, no matter that their neighbours had always thought they were just retired clerks, or artists, or tramps, or perfume-sellers, or loners.

They'd be found like the victims of any other killings, their bodies dumped, under mounds of old things. But there would always be documents, somewhere close by or left for journalists or the community, that proved the victim was militia. Awful wounds on both sides of their necks, as if ragged, serrated scissors had half closed on them. Jack the Remade, using what the city gave him.

That wasn't alright. It wasn't alright for Jack to think he could touch the functionaries of the government. I know that's how they thought. That's when it became imperative that they bring him down. But with all their efforts, all the money they were ready to spend on bribes, all the thaumaturgy they dedicated – the channellers and scanners, the empathy-engines turned up full – in the end they got lucky, and picked up some blabbering terrified useless little turd.

I made sure it was me first went in to greet him, Jack's snitch, after we got hold of him. I made sure we had some time alone. It weren't pretty, but I stand by it.

It's been a long time since I been in this secret political life. And there are conventions that are important. One is, don't get personal. When I apply the pressures I need to, when I do what needs to be done, it's a job that needs doing, no matter how unpleasant. If you're fighting the *sickness of society,* and make no mistake that's what we do, then sometimes you have to use harsh methods, but you don't relish it, or it'll taint you. You do what has to be done.

Most of the time.

This was different.

This little fucker was mine.

It's a windowless room, of course. He was in a chair, locked in place. His arms, his legs. He was shaking so hard, I could hear the chair rattling, though it was bolted down. An iron band filled his mouth, so all he could do was whine.

I came in. I was carrying tools. I made sure he saw them: the pliers, the solder, the blades. I made him shake even more, without touching him. Tears came out of him so fast. I waited.

"Shhh," I said at last, through his noise. "Shhh. I have to tell you something."

I was shaking my head: *No, hush.* I felt cruelty in me. *Hush,* I said, *hush.* And when he quieted, I spoke again.

"I made sure I got to take care of you," I said. "In a minute my boss'll be coming in to help us, and he knows what we're going to do. But I wanted you to know that *I made sure* I got this job, because…well, I think you know a friend of mine."

When I said Jack's name the traitor started mewling and making all this noise again, he was so scared, so I had to wait another minute or two, before I whispered to him, "So *this*…is for *Jack."*

The leader of my crew came in then, and another couple of lads, and we looked at each other, and we began. And it weren't pretty. And I ain't supposed to glory in that, but just this once, just this once. This was the fucker sold out Jack.

I knew it couldn't last, Jack's reign (because that's what it was). I couldn't not know it, and it made me sad. But you couldn't fight the inevitability.

When I heard they'd caught him, I had to fight, to work hard, not to let myself show sad. Like I said, I was only a small part of the operation – I'm not a big player, and that's more than fine by me, I don't want to run this dangerous business. I'd rather be told what to do. But I'd taken such pride in it, you know? Hearing of what he was doing, and always knowing that I was connected. There are always networks, behind every so-called loner, and being part of one…well, it meant something. I'll always carry that.

But I knew it would end, so I tried to steel myself. And I never went to see him, when they stretched him out in BilSantum Plaza, Remade again, his first Remaking gone, knowing he'd be dead before the wound healed. I wonder how many in that crowd were known to him. I heard that it went a bit wrong for the Mayor, that the crowds never jeered or threw muck at the stocks. People loved Jack. Why would I want to see him like that? I know how I want to remember him.

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So the snitch, the tattletale, was in my hands, and I made sure he felt it. There are techniques – you have to know ways to stop pain, and I know them, and I withheld them.

I left that fucker red and dripping. He'll never be the fucking same. *For Jack,* I thought. Try telling tales again. I did something to his tongue.

As I did it, as I dug my fingers in him, I kept thinking of when I met Half-a-Prayer.

People need something, you know, to escape. They do. They need something to make them feel free. It's good for us, it's necessary. The city needs it. But there comes a time when it has to end.

Jack was going too far. And there'll be others, I know that too.

I knew it was necessary. He really had gone too far. But I can't talk to my workmates about this, like I say, because I don't think they think this stuff through. They just always went on about what a bastard Half-a-Prayer was, and how he'd get his, and blah blah. I don't think they realise that the city needs people like him, that he's good for all of us.

People have their heroes, and gods know I don't grudge them that. It ain't a surprise. They – the people I mean – don't know how hard it is to keep a city, a state like New Crobuzon going, why some of the things that get done get done. It can be harsh. If Jack gives people a reason to keep going, they should have it. So long as it don't get out of hand, which, of course, it always does. That's why he had to be stopped. But there'll be another one, with more big shows, more grand gestures and thefts and the like. People need that.

I'm grateful to Jack and his kin. If they weren't there, and this is what I think my mates don't understand, if they weren't there, and all them angry people in Dog Fenn and Kelltree and Smog Bend had no one to cheer on, gods know what they'd do. That would be much worse.

So here's a cheer for Jack Half-a-Prayer. As a spectator who enjoyed his shows, and a loyal and loving servant of this city, I toast him in his death as I did in his life. And I exacted a little revenge for him, even though I know it was past time for him to stop.

It was a basic Remaking. We took that little traitor's legs and put

engines in their place, but I made sure to do a little extra. Reshaped a suckered filament from some fish-thing's carcass, put it in place of his tongue. It'll fight him. Can't kill him, but his tongue'll hate him till the day he's gone. That was my present to Jack.

That's what I did at work today.

When I met Jack he wasn't Jack yet. My boss, he's the master craftsman. Bio-thaumaturge. It was him did the clayflesh, who went to work. It was him took off Jack's right hand.

But it was me held the claw. That great, outsized mantis limb, hinging chitin blades the length of my forearm. I held it on Jack's stump while my boss made the flesh and scute run together and alloy. It was him Remade Jack, but I was part of it, and that'll always make me proud.

I was thinking about names as I knocked off today, as I walked home through this city it's my honour to protect. I know there are plenty who don't understand what has to be done sometimes, and if the name of Jack Half-a-Prayer gives them pleasure, I don't grudge them that.

Jack, the man I made. It's his name, now, whatever he was called before.

Like I say, in the short time I knew him, before I made him and after, I never called Jack by his name nor he me. We couldn't, not in this line of work. Whenever I spoke to Jack, I called him "Prisoner," and answering, he called me "Sir."

Immolation

JEFFREY THOMAS

1: KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES

THEY HAD made it snow again this weekend, as they would every weekend until Christmas. Not on the weekdays, hampering the traffic of workers, or so much today as to inconvenience the shoppers; rather, enough to inspire consumers to further holiday spirit, and further purchases.

High atop the Vat, a machine that to some might resemble an oil tanker of old standing on its prow, Magnesium Jones crouched back amongst the conduits and exhaust ports like an infant gargoyle on the verge of crowning. His womb was a steamy one; the heat from the blowers would have cooked a birther like a lobster. Jones was naked, his shoulder pressed against the hood of a whirring fan. When he had instant coffee or soup to make he would boil water by resting a pot atop the fan's cap. He was not wearing clothes lest they catch fire.

Not all the cultures were designed to be so impervious to heat; some, rather, were unperturbed by extreme cold. On the sixth terrace of the plant proper, which faced the Vat, a group of cultures took break in the open air, a few of them naked and turning their faces up to the powdery blizzard invitingly. It had been an alarming development for many, the Plant's management allowing cultures to take break. It suggested they needed consideration, even concern.

Jones squinted through the blowing veils of snow. He recognized a number of the laborers. Though all were bald, and all cloned from a mere half-dozen masters, their heads were tattooed in individual designs so

as to distinguish them from each other. Numbers and letters usually figured into these designs – codes. Some had their names tattooed on their foreheads, and all tattoos were colored according to department: violet for Shipping, gray for the Vat, blue for Cryogenics, red for the Ovens, and so on. Magnesium Jones's tattoo was of the last color. But there was also some artistry employed in the tattoo designs. They might portray familiar landmarks from Punktown, or from Earth where most of Punktown's colonists originated, at least in ancestry. Animals, celebrities, sports stars. Magnesium Jones's tattoo was a ring of flame around his head like a corona, with a few black letters and a bar code in the flames like the charred skeleton of a burnt house.

Some artistry, some fun and flourish, was also employed in the naming of the cultures. On the terrace he recognized Sherlock Jones, Imitation Jones and Basketball Jones. He thought he caught a glimpse of Subliminal Jones heading back inside. Waxlips Jones sat on the edge of the railing, dangling his legs over the street far below. Jones Jones held a steaming coffee. Huckleberry Jones was in subdued conversation with Digital Jones. Copyright Jones and M. I. Jones emerged from the building to join the rest.

Watching them, Magnesium Jones missed his own conversations with some of them, missed the single break that he looked forward to through the first ten hours of the work day. But did he miss the creatures themselves, he wondered? He felt a kinship with other cultures, an empathy for their lives, their situations, in a general sense…but that might merely be because he saw himself in them, felt for his own life, his own situation. Sometimes the kinship felt like brotherhood. But affection? Friendship? Love? He wasn't sure if his feelings could be defined in that way. Or was it just that the birthers felt no more strongly, merely glossed and romanticized their own pale feelings?

But Jones did not share the plight of the robot, the android…the question of whether they could consider themselves alive, of whether they could aspire to actual emotion. He felt very much alive. He felt some very strong emotions. Anger. Hatred. These feelings, unlike love, were not at all ambiguous.

He turned away from the snowy vista of Plant and city beyond, shiv-

ering, glad to slip again into his nest of thrumming heat. From an insulated box he had stolen and dragged up here he took some clothing. Some of it was fireproof, some not. The long black coat, with its broad lapels turned up to protect his neck from the snow, had a heated mesh in the lining. Worn gloves, and he pulled a black ski hat over his bald head, as much to conceal his tattoo as to shield his naked scalp from snow. He stared at his wrist, willing numbers to appear there. They told him the time. A feature all the cultures at the Plant possessed, to help them time their work efficiently. He had an appointment, a meeting, but he had plenty of time yet to get there.

As much as he scorned his former life in the Plant, there were some behaviors too ingrained to shake. Magnesium Jones was ever punctual.

Walking the street, Jones slipped on a pair of dark glasses. In the vicinity of the Plant it would be easy to recognize him as a culture. The six masters had all been birther males, criminals condemned to death (they had been paid for the rights to clone them for industrial labor). Under current law it was illegal to clone living human beings. Clones of living beings might equate themselves with their originals. Clones of living beings might thus believe they had certain rights.

Wealthy people stored clones of themselves in case of mishap, cloned families and friends, illegally. Everyone knew that. For all Jones knew, the president of the Plant might be a clone himself. But still, somehow, the cultures were cultures. Still a breed of their own.

Behind the safe shields of his dark lenses, Jones studied the faces of people he passed on the street. Birthers, Christmas shopping, but their faces closed off in hard privacy. The closer birthers were grouped together, the more cut off they became from each other in that desperate animal need for their own territory, even if it extended no further than their scowls and stern, downcast eyes.

Distant shouted chants made him turn his head, though he already knew their source. There was always a group of strikers camped just outside the barrier of the Plant. Tents, smoke from barrel fires, banners rippling in the snowy gusts. There was one group on a hunger strike, emaciated as concentration camp prisoners. A few weeks ago, one woman

had self-immolated. Jones had heard screams, and come to the edge of his high hideout to watch. He had marveled at the woman's calm as she sat cross-legged, a black silhouette with her head already charred bald at the center of a small inferno…had marveled at how she did not run or cry out, panic or lose her resolve. He admired her strength, her commitment. It was a sacrifice for her fellow human beings, an act which would suggest that the birthers felt a greater brotherhood than the cultures did, after all. But then, their society encouraged such feelings, whereas the cultures were discouraged from friendship, companionship, affection.

Then again, maybe the woman had just been insane.

To reach the basement pub Jones edged through a narrow tunnel of dripping ceramic brick, the floor a metal mesh…below which he heard dark liquid rushing. A section of wall on the right opened up, blocked by chicken wire, and in a dark room like a cage a group of mutants or aliens or mutated aliens gazed out at him as placid as animals waiting to eat or be eaten (and maybe that was so, too); they were so tall their heads scraped the ceiling, thinner than skeletons, with cracked faces that looked shattered and glued back together. Their hair was cobwebs blowing, though to Jones the clotted humid air down here seemed to pool around his legs.

A throb of music grew until he opened a metal door and it exploded in his face like a boobytrap. Slouched heavy backs at a bar, a paunchy naked woman doing a slow grinding dance atop a billiard table. Jones did not so much as glance at her immense breasts, aswirl in smoky colored light like planets; the Plant's cultures had no sexual cravings, none of them even female.

At a corner table sat a young man with red hair, something seldom seen naturally. He smiled and made a small gesture. Jones headed toward him, slipping off his shades. He watched the man's hands atop the table; was there a gun resting under the newspaper?

The man's hair was long and greasy, his beard scruffy and inadequate, but he was good-looking and his voice was friendly. "Glad you decided to come. I'm Nevin Parr." They shook hands. "Sit down. Drink?"

"Coffee."

The man motioned to a waitress, who brought them both a coffee. The birther wasn't dulling his senses with alcohol, either, Jones noted.

"So how did you meet my pal Moodring?" asked the birther, lifting his chipped mug for a cautious sip.

"On the street. He gave me money for food in turn for a small favor."

"So now you move a little drug for him sometimes. Hold hot weapons for him sometimes."

Jones frowned at his gloved hands, knotted like mating tarantulas. "I'm disappointed. I thought Moodring was more discreet than that."

"Please don't be angry at him; I told you, we're old pals. So, anyway… should I call you Mr. Jones?" Parr smiled broadly. "Magnesium? Or is it Mag?"

"It's all equally meaningless."

"I've never really talked with a culture before."

"We prefer 'shadow.'"

"All right. Mr. Shadow. So how old are you?"

"Five."

"Pretty bright for a five-year-old."

"Memory-encoded long-chain molecules in a brain drip. I knew my job before I even got out of the tank."

"Of course. Five, huh? So that's about the age when they start replacing you guys, right? They say that's when you start getting uppity… losing control. That's why you escaped from the Plant, isn't it? You knew your time was pretty much up."

"Yes. I knew what was coming. Nine cultures in my crew were removed in two days. They were all about my age. My supervisor told me not to worry, but I knew…"

"Cleaning house. Bringing in the fresh meat. They kill them, don't they? The old cultures. They incinerate them."

"Yes."

"I heard you killed two men in escaping. Two real men."

"Moodring is very talkative."

"It isn't just him. You killed two men. I heard they were looking for

you. Call you 'hothead,' because of your tattoo. Can I see it?"

"That wouldn't be wise in public, would it?"

"You're not the only escaped clone around here, but you're right, we have work that demands discretion. Just that I like tattoos; I have some myself. See?" He rolled up a sleeve, exposing a dark mass that Jones only gave a half-glance. "I hear they get pretty wild with your tattoos. Someone must enjoy himself."

"Robots do the tattooing. They're just accessing clip art files. Most times it has nothing to do with our function or the name that was chosen for us. It's done to identify us, and probably for the amusement of our human coworkers. Decorative for them, I suppose."

"You haven't been caught, but you're still living in this area, close to the Plant. You must be stealthy. That's a useful quality. So where are you staying?"

"That's none of your concern. When you need me you leave a message with Moodring. When he sees me around he'll tell me. Moodring doesn't need to know where I live, either."

"He your friend, Moodring, or is it just business?"

"I have no friends."

"That's too bad. I think you and I could be friends."

"You don't know how much that means to me. So, why did you want me? Because I'm a culture? And if so, why?"

"Again…because you killed two men escaping the Plant. I know you can kill again, given the right incentive."

"I'm glad we've got to that. So what's my incentive?"

"Five thousand munits."

"For killing a man? That's pretty cheap."

"Not for a culture who never made a coin in his life. Not for a culture who lives in the street somewhere."

"So who am I to kill?"

"More incentive for you," said Nevin Parr, who smiled far too much for Jones's taste. Jones seldom smiled. He had heard that smiling was a trait left over from the animal ancestry of the birthers; it was a threatening baring of the fangs, in origin. The idea amused him, made him feel more evolved for so seldom contorting his own face in that way. After

his smiling heavy pause, Parr continued, "The man we have in mind is Ephraim Mayda."

Jones raised his hairless eyebrows, grunted, and stirred his coffee. "He's a union captain. Well guarded. Martyr material."

"Never mind the repercussions; he's trouble for the people I'm working for, and worth the lesser trouble of his death."

Jones lifted his eyes in sudden realization. He almost plunged his hand into his coat for the pistol he had bought from Moodring. "You work for the Plant!" he hissed.

Parr grinned. "I work for myself. But never mind who hired me."

Jones composed himself outwardly, but his heart pulsed as deeply as the music. "The union is cozy with the syndy."

"The people I work for can handle the syndy. Mag, those strikers out there hate you…shadows. They've lynched a dozen of your kind in a row outside the Plant barrier. If they had their way, every one of your kind would go into the incinerator tomorrow. You yourself got roughed up by a group that got inside the Plant, I hear." Parr paused knowingly. His spoon clinked in his mug, making a vortex. "They broke in. Trashed machines. Killed a few of your kind. I heard from our mutual friend that they found you naked by the showers, and cut you…badly."

"It didn't affect my job," Jones muttered, not looking the human in the eyes. "And it's not like I ever used the thing but to piss. So now I piss like a birther woman."

"Didn't bother you at all, then? Doesn't bother you that Mayda works these thugs up like that?"

They were angry. Jones could understand that. If there was anything that made him feel a kinship with the birthers, it was anger. Still, the weight of their resentment…of their loathing…their outright furious hatred…was a labor to bear. They had hurt him. He had never intentionally harmed a birther. It was the Plant's decision to utilize cultures for half their workforce (more than that would constitute a labor violation, but the conservative candidate for Prime Minister was fighting to make it so that companies did not have to guarantee any ratio of nonclones; freedom of enterprise must be upheld, he cried). Let the strikers mutilate the president of the Plant, instead. Let them hang him and his

underlings in the shadow of the Vat. But didn't they see – even though Jones worked in their place while their unemployment ran out and their families starved like the protestors – that he was as much a victim as they?

This man was under the employ of his enemies. Of course, he himself had once been under their employ. Still, could he trust this man as his partner in crime? No. But he could do business with men he didn't trust. He wouldn't turn his back to Moodring, either, but in the end he needed to eat. Five thousand munits. He had never earned a coin until he had escaped the Plant, and never a legal one since.

He could go away. Somewhere hot. Have his tattoo removed. Maybe even his useless vestige of "manhood" restored.

Parr went on, "A third bit of incentive. You're no fool, so I'll admit it. The people who hired me…you once worked for them, too. If you decline, well…like I say, they'd like to get a hold of you after what you did to those two men."

Slowly and deliberately Jones's eyes lifted, staring from under bony brows. He smiled. It was like a baring of fangs.

"You were doing well, Nevin. Don't spoil it with unnecessary incentives. I'll help you kill your man."

"Sorry." Ever the smile. "Just that they want this to happen soon, and I don't want to have to look for a partner from scratch."

"Why do you need a partner?"

"Well let me tell you…"

2: THE PIMP OF THE INVERSE

From his perch atop the Vat, with its stained streaked sides and its deep liquid burbling, Jones watched night fall in Punktown. The snow was a mere whisking about of loose flakes. Colored lights glowed in the city beyond the Plant, and flashed here and there on the Plant itself, but for less gay purposes. Once in a while there was a bright violet-hued flash in the translucent dome of the shipping department, as another batch of products was teleported elsewhere on this planet, or to another. Perhaps a crew destined to work on an asteroid mine, or to build an orbital space station or a new colony, a new Punktown,

on some world not yet raped, merely groped.

He watched a hovertruck with a covered bed like a military troop carrier pull out of the shipping docks, and head for the east gate. A shipment with a more localized destination. Jones imagined its contents, the manufactured goods, seated in two rows blankly facing each other. Cultures not yet tattooed, not yet named. Perhaps the companies they were destined for did not utilize tattoos and decorative names – mocking names, Jones mused – to identify the clone workers. Jones wondered what, if anything, went on in their heads along the drive. They had not yet been programmed for their duties, not yet had their brain drips. He, whose job it had been to bake these golems, had been born already employed, unlike them. They were innocent in their staring mindlessness, better off for their mindlessness, Jones thought, watching the truck vanish into the night. He himself was still a child, but a tainted innocent; the months since his escape had been like a compacted lifetime. Had he been better off in his first days, not yet discontented? Disgruntled? There were those times, he in his newfound pride would hate to admit, that he felt like a human boy who longed to be a wooden puppet again.

He listened to the Vat gurgle with its amniotic solutions, pictured in his mind the many mindless fetuses sleeping without dream in the great silo of a womb beneath him. Yes, Christmas was coming. Jones thought of its origins, of the birther woman Mary's immaculate conception, and gave an ugly smirk.

He lifted his wrist, gazed at it until luminous numbers like another tattoo materialized. Time to go; he didn't like being late.

So that Parr would not guess just how close Jones lived to the Plant, he had told Parr to pick him up over at Pewter Square. To reach it, Jones had to cross the Obsidian Street Overpass. It was a slightly arched bridge of a Ramon design, built of incredibly tough Ramon wood lacquered what once had been a glossy black. It was now smeared and spray-painted, dusty and chipped. Vehicles whooshed across in either direction, filling the covered bridge with roaring noise. The pedestrian walkway was protected from the traffic by a rickety railing, missing sections now

patched with chicken wire. Furthermore, homeless people had nested in amongst the recesses of the bridge's wooden skeleton, most having built elaborate parasite structures of scrap wood, sheets of metal, plastic or ceramic. One elderly and malnourished Choom, a former monk of the dwindling Raloom faith, lived inside a large cardboard box on the front of which, as if it were a temple, he had drawn the stern features of Raloom. The pedestrian walkway was bordered on one side by the railing, on the other by this tiny shanty town. Some of its denizens sold coffee to the passers-by, or newspaper hard copies, or coaxed them behind their crinkly plastic curtains or soggy cardboard partitions for the sale of drugs and sex.

Jones knew one of these shadowy creatures, and as if it had been awaiting him, it half emerged from its shelter as he approached. Its small house was one of the most elaborate; as if to pretend that it belonged to the bridge, in case of an infrequent mass eviction, it had constructed its dwelling of wood and painted it glossy black. The shack even had mock windows, though these were actually dusty mirrors. Jones saw his own solemn face multiply reflected as he approached, his black ski hat covering his tattoo.

The tiny figure moved spidery limbs as if in slow motion, but its head constantly twitched and gave sudden jolts from side to side, so fast its features blurred. When still, they were puny black holes in a huge hairless head – twice the size of Jones's – almost perfectly round and with the texture of pumice. No one but Jones would know that this was no ordinary mutant, but a culture defect from the Plant, an immaculate misconception, who had somehow escaped incineration and to freedom. Who would suspect that they had been cloned from the same master? The defect had once stopped Jones and struck up a conversation. Jones's hairless eyebrows had given him away. When not wearing dark glasses, Jones now wore his ski hat pulled down to his eyes.

"Where are we going at this hour?" crackled the misshapen being, who had named itself Edgar Allan Jones. Magnesium Jones could not understand why a shadow would willingly give itself such a foolish name, but then sometimes he wondered why he hadn't come up with a new name for himself.

"Restless," he grunted, stopping in front of the lacquered dollhouse. He heard a teakettle whistling in there, and muffled radio music that sounded like a child's toy piano played at an inhuman speed.

"Christmas is in three days, now," said the flawed clone, cracking a toothless smile. "Will you come see me? We can listen to the radio together. Play cards. I'll make you tea."

Jones glanced past Edgar into the miniature house. Could the two of them both fit in there? It seemed claustrophobic. And too intimate a scene for his taste. Still, he felt flattered, and couldn't bring himself to flat-out refuse. Instead, he said, "I may not be around here that day…but if I am…we'll see."

"You have never been inside…why not come in now? I can…"

"I can't now, I'm sorry; I have…some business."

The globe of a head blurred, halted abruptly, the smile shaken into a frown. "That Moodring friend of yours will lead you to your death."

"He isn't my friend," Jones said, and started away.

"Don't forget Christmas!" the creature croaked.

Jones nodded over his shoulder but kept on walking, feeling strangely guilty for not just stepping inside for one cup of tea. After all, he was quite early for his appointment.

"Ever been in a car before?" Parr asked, smiling, as he pulled from the curb into the glittering dark current of night traffic.

"Taxi," Jones murmured, stiff as a mannequin.

"Mayda lives at Hanging Gardens; it's a few blocks short of Beaumonde Square. He's not starving like the folks he works up; he has a nice apartment to go home to. It's that syndy money."

"Mm."

"Hey," Parr looked over at him, "don't be nervous. Just keep thinking about your lines. You're going to be a vid star, my man…a celebrity."

3: THE CARVEN WARRIOR

Parr let Jones off, and the hovercar disappeared around the corner. Jones cut across a snow-caked courtyard as instructed, his boots squeaking as if he tramped across styrofoam. He slipped between apartment units,

climbed a set of stairs to another, and found a door propped open for him. Parr motioned him inside, then let the door fall back in place. Jones heard it lock. He didn't ask Parr how he had got inside the vestibule.

Together they padded down a gloomy corridor across a carpet of peach and purple diamonds. The walls and doors that flanked the men were pristine white. This place reminded Jones of the cleaner regions of the Plant; primarily, the seldom seen administration levels. He listened to the moving creak of Parr's faux leather jacket. Both of them wore gloves, and Jones still had on his ski hat and a scarf wound around his neck against the hellish cold he could never get used to.

A lift took them to the sixth floor. Then, side by side, they made their way down the hall to the door at its very end. Quite easily, Parr knocked, and then beamed at his companion.

Jones pulled off his ski hat at last, and pushed it into his pocket. In the dim light, his hairless pate gleamed softly, the fiery halo pricked into his skin burning darkly. He hid both hands behind his back.

"Who is it?" asked a voice over an intercom. Above the door, a tiny camera eye, small as an ant's feeler, must now be watching them.

"Enforcer, sir," said Parr, his voice uncharacteristically serious. And he did look the part in his black uniform; leather jacket, beetle-like helmet, holstered weapons. He had cut his hair to a butch and shaved to a neat goatee. He held one of Jones's elbows. "May I have a word?"

"What's going on?"

"Your neighbor down the hall reported a suspicious person, and we found this culture lurking around. He claims he's not an escapee, but was purchased by an Ephraim Mayda."

"Mr. Mayda doesn't own any cultures."

"May I please speak with Mr. Mayda himself?" Parr sighed irritably.

A new voice came on. "I know that scab!" it rumbled. "He escaped from the Plant, murdered two human beings!"

"What? Are you sure of this?"

"Yes! He was from the Ovens department. It was on the news!"

"May I speak with you in person, Mr. Mayda?"

"I don't want that killer freak in my house!"

"I have him manacled, sir. Look, I need to take down a report on this…your recognizing him is valuable."

"Whatever. But you'd better have him under control…"

The two men heard the lock clack off. The knob was turned from the other side, and as the door opened Jones pushed through first, reaching his right hand inside his coat as he went. He saw two faces inside, both half-identical in that both wore expressions of shock, horror, as he ripped his small silvery block of a pistol from its holster to thrust at their wide stares. But one man was bleached blond and one man was dark-haired and Jones shot the blond in the face. A neat, third nostril breathed open beside one of the other two, but the back of the blond's head was kicked open like saloon doors. The darker man batted his eyes at the blood that spattered him. The report had been as soft as a child's cough, the blond crumpled almost delicately to the floor, Jones and then Parr stepped onto the lush white carpet and Parr locked the door after them.

"Who are you?" Mayda cried, raising his hands, backing against the wall.

"Into the living room," Jones snarled, flicking the gun. Mayda glanced behind him, slid his shoulders along the wall and backed through a threshold into an expanse of plush parlor with a window overlooking the snowy courtyard of Hanging Gardens. Parr went to tint the window full black.

"I'll give you money, listen…" Mayda began.

"You do remember me, don't you?" Jones hissed, leveling the gun at the paunchy birther's groin. "You emasculated me, remember that?"

"I didn't! That was those crazy strikers that got in the Plant that time…that was out of my hands!"

"So how do you know about it? They told you. It was a big joke, wasn't it?"

"What do you want? You can have anything!" The union captain's eyes fearfully latched onto Parr as he slipped something odd from his jacket. What looked like three gun barrels were unfolded and spread into a tripod. Atop it, Parr screwed a tiny vidcam. A green light came on,

indicating that it had begun filming. Parr remained behind the camera, and Mayda flashed his eyes back to Jones to see what he had to say.

Jones hesitated. What he had to say was rehearsed, but the lines were a jumble in his head, words exploded to fragments by the silent shot that had killed the blond. He had killed a man…for the third time. It came naturally to him, like a brain-dripped skill; it was a primal animal instinct, survival. So why, in its aftermath, should he feel this…disconcertion?

His eyes darted about the room. He had never been in such a place. Tables fashioned from some green glassy stone. Sofas and chairs of white with a silvery lace of embroidery. A bar, a holotank. On the walls, a modest art collection. Atop several tables, shelves and pedestals, various small Ramon sculptures, all carved from an iridescent white crystal. Animals, and a Ramon warrior rendered in amazing detail considering the medium, from his lionlike head to the lance or halberd he brought to bear in anticipation of attack. Each piece must be worth a fortune. And yet there were men and women camped outside the Plant who were on a hunger strike, emaciated. And those who were emaciated but not by choice. And Jones recalled that woman sitting in her shroud of flame.

His disconcertion cleared. Jones returned a molten gaze to the terrified birther. The anger in his voice was not some actor's fakery, even if the words were not his own.

"I'm here to make a record, Mr. Mayda…of the beginning of a rebellion, and the first blow in a war that won't stop until we clones are given the same rights as you natural born."

It was clever, he had mused earlier; the Plant would be rid of the thorn in their lion's paw, and yet the law and the syndy would not hold the Plant responsible. No, it would be a dangerous escaped culture who killed Ephraim Mayda; a fanatic with grand delusions. Still, Jones had considered, wouldn't this make birther workers at the Plant, unemployed workers outside and a vast majority of the public in general all the more distrusting of cultures, opposed to their widespread use? Wouldn't this hurt the Plant's very existence? And yet, they surely knew what they were doing better than he. After all, he was just a culture…educated by brain drip, by listening to human workers talk and to the radio programs the human workers listened to. Educated on the

street since that time. But these men sat at vast glossy tables, making vast decisions. It was beyond his scope. The most he could wrap his thoughts around was payment of five thousand munits…and Parr had given him half of that when he climbed into his hovercar tonight.

"Hey," Mayda blubbered, "what are you saying…look…please! Listen…"

"We want to live as you do," Jones went on, improvising now as the rest of the words slipped through the fingers of his mind. He thought of his own hellish nest, and of Edgar's tiny black shed of a home. "We want…"

"Hey! Freeze!" he heard Parr yell.

Jones snapped his head around. What was happening? Had another bodyguard emerged from one of the other rooms? They should have checked all of the rooms first, they should have…

Parr was pointing the police issue pistol at him, not at some new player, and before Jones could bring his own gun around Parr snapped off five shots in rapid succession. Gas clouds flashed from the muzzle, heat lightning with no thunder, but the lightning struck Jones down. He felt a fireball streak across the side of his throat, deadened somewhat by the scarf wound there. He was kicked by a horse in the collarbone, and three projectiles in a cluster entered the upper left side of his chest. He spun down onto his belly on the white carpet, and saw his blood flecked there like beads of dew, in striking close-up. Beautiful red beads like tiny rubies clinging to the white fibers of the carpet. Even violence was glamorous in this place.

Mayda scampered closer, kicked his small silvery gun out of his hand. Jones's guts spasmed, but his outer body didn't so much as flinch. He cracked his lids a fraction, through crossed lashes saw Parr moving closer as well. For a moment, he had thought it was another man. Since firing the shots from behind the camera, out of its view, Parr had shed the bogus forcer uniform and changed into street clothes.

"I thought I heard a strange voice in here, Mr. Mayda!" Parr gushed, out of breath. "I dozed off in the other room…I'm so sorry! Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank God. He killed Brett!"

"How'd he get in here?"

"I don't know…Brett went to answer the door, and the next thing I knew…"

Parr didn't work for the Plant, Jones realized now, poor dumb culture that he was. He cursed himself. He wasn't street smart. He was a child. He was five years old…

Parr worked for Ephraim Mayda, captain of a union, friend of the syndicate. Mayda, whose trusting followers killed others and themselves to fight for a job, to fight for their bread and shelter, while his job was to exploit their hunger, their anger and fear.

And the vid. The vid of a murderous clone attacking a hero of the people, stopped just in time by a loyal bodyguard (while another loyal bodyguard, poor Brett, had been sacrificed). One murderous forerunner of a much larger threat, as he had proclaimed. The vid that would unite the public against the cultures, lead to an outcry for the abolition of cloned workers…to their mass incineration…

He had almost seen this before. He'd let the money dazzle him. The bullets had slapped him fully awake.

"Call the forcers!" Mayda said for the benefit of the camera, sounding shaken, though he had known all along he was safe.

Through his lashes, Jones saw Parr stoop to retrieve his silvery handgun.

Jones's left arm was folded under him. He reached into his coat, and rolling onto his side, tore free a second gun, this one glossy black, a gun Parr hadn't known about, and as Parr lifted his startled head, Jones let loose a volley of shots as fast as he could depress the trigger. Parr sat down hard on his rump comically, and as each shot struck him he bounced like a child on his father's knee. When at last Jones stopped shooting him, his face almost black with blood and holes, Parr slumped forward into his own lap.

Jones sat up with a nova of agony in his chest, and a nova of hot gas exploded before his eyes as he saw Mayda bolting for the door. The shot hit the birther in the right buttock, and he sprawled onto his face shrieking like a hysterical child frightened by a nightmare.

As Jones struggled to his feet, staggered and regained his footing,

Mayda pulled himself toward the door on his belly. Almost casually, Jones walked to him, stood over him, and pointed the small black gun. Mayda rolled over to scream up at him and bullets drove the scream back into his throat. Jones shot out both eyes, and bullets punched in his nose and smashed his teeth, so that the face remaining looked to Jones like Edgar's with its simple black holes for features.

The gun had clicked empty. He let it drop, stepped over Mayda's body, over Brett's body further on, and then stopped before the door, snuffing his ski hat over the flames of his skull. But before he opened the door, he changed his mind and returned to the plush, vast parlor just for a moment…

It was an hour to dawn when Magnesium Jones reached the house of Edgar Allan Jones on the Obsidian Street Overpass.

Edgar croaked in delight to see him, until the withered being saw the look on the taller culture's face. It took Jones's arm, and helped him as he stooped to enter the tiny black-painted shack.

"You're hurt!" Edgar cried, supporting Jones as he lowered himself into a small rickety chair at a table in the center of the room. Aside from shelves, there was little else. No bed. A radio played music like the cries of whales in reverse, and a kettle was steaming on a battery-pack hot plate.

"I have something for you," Jones said, his voice a wheeze, one of his lungs deflated in the cradle of his ribs. "A Christmas present…"

"I have to get help. I'll go out…stop a car in the street," Edgar went on.

Jones caught its arm before Edgar could reach the door. He smiled at the creature. "I'd like a cup of tea," he said.

For several moments Edgar stared at the man, gouged features unreadable. Then, in slow motion, head blurring, it turned and went to the hot plate and steaming kettle.

While Edgar's back was turned, Jones reached into his long black coat, now soaked heavy with his blood, and from a pouch in its lining withdrew a sculpture carved from opalescent crystal. It was a fierce Ramon warrior, bringing his lance to bear. He placed it on the table quietly, so

that the stunted clone would be surprised when it turned back around.

And while he waited for Edgar to turn around with his tea, Jones stripped off his ski hat and lowered his fiery brow onto one arm on the table. Closed his eyes to rest.

Yes, he would just rest a little while…until his friend finally turned around.

The Lizard of Ooze

JAY LAKE

IT'S A CITY IN A GREAT, DEEP HOLE, Ooze is, a pit black as any mine. Roads, buildings and towers cling to the walls like children trapped at the bottom of a well. Sunlight leaks in at the top, a little, a few hours a day, and darkness fills the rest, down to the monster-haunted depths.

I live between the light and darkness. I hunt what doesn't belong on our laddered stairs and narrow, pit-girdling streets. I am a Shadow of the Shadow stirps, a quiet brotherhood no better defined than smoke, no easier caught than steam.

Ooze is among the darkest of the Dark Towns, those cities hidden within the blank spaces of the map. For all that good Kentucky bluegrass grows far above our heads we may as well be worms in a cave.

Which suits me fine, pale as I am.

I was sidling along one of the streets of the Mycotic Level one night, leaning past the outflung beams of the growing trays, when I heard shouting from somewhere above me, perhaps the fifth or sixth ladderway descending from the Seats of Ease, which are the next higher level.

Quickly I scuttled up a side-ladder. Shouting is not common in Ooze – echoes have a way of reaching far into the inky depths and returning in the mouths of strange creatures that then must be Shadow-hunted. Lives can be lost, and the bounties due to my stirps are never cheap.

The Seats of Ease are great banks of limestone panels set in ells, a high back and a narrower bench, with polished oval voids carved out of them, where the folk of Ooze meet to relieve their bowels and discuss

politics, sex, and dancing. There are usually chattering groups there, or young folk with their robes hitched around their waists holding hands and kissing.

Tonight there was a mob, a group of Fine-Icers and some several folk from smaller stirpes, and even a few limerocks, those sad neutrals who hold no real place in the pageant of our city's life. They were crowded around the base of the fifth ladderway, shouting and shoving. They were mobbing someone to death.

And to sunlight with that, I thought. If anyone's to be killed here, it's me going to do the killing. I stroked my shadow suit into noctilucence and drew the Blades Sinister and Truth. Roaring with the voice of winds all Shadows know, I stormed the crowd from behind. "Stand free, there, or I'll cut you open and charge by the slice!"

The crowd parted as crowds will at such sound and fury, though I was smaller than almost all of them. I let the Blades dance, my hands spinning, so that the bright blur of my shadow suit would catch their eyes – and turn their knives – while the Blades held their fear.

Their parting pushed back further, making a kind of lane through to a little man, even smaller than I, crouched on the splintered decking of the ladderway's landing. His hands were folded over his head in anticipation of the kicking he had been about to receive and spilled around him was –

"Ah," I said.

No wonder they were ready to kill. This was one of the perverted folk from above, twisted by their sneering little civilization and regimented, line-scarred maps, and he'd brought his *food* with him.

Eating in public was a capital offence here in Ooze. The mob was certainly within the bounds of propriety. Our visitor was already dead, though his sentence had not yet been carried out.

"It's my business now," I announced to the crowd, Blades still dancing. "Get on."

"I'm fetching the Reliables," someone shouted, safely hidden behind several departing Fine-Icers.

"Fetch away, friend," I said with a smile in my voice. The Reliables

were our police stirps, never interested in extra trouble. "They'll certainly stand aside for a Shadow in this matter."

Then I crouched beside the dead man, whose cowering head was pointed away from me, and sheathed the Blade Truth. The truth was already known. I steeled my resolve, then sniffed deeply, scenting for his sin.

Something light and earthy…corn meal, perhaps, baked in a cake. A pungent scent, with undertones of sugars and something sharp…beans, in a rich sauce. And finally the rich smell of protein with salty, sweaty overtones. Fish.

I poked the dead man with the Blade Sinister, its tip sliding perhaps a quarter inch into his buttock.

"Hey!" he screeched, jerking his head up from his crouch.

"Hello, dead man," I said. "What brings you here in your perversions?"

"I…I…fish. I am a fisheater. You cannot touch me." He looked wildly around, lank, pale hair slapping against his shoulders. Even past the food, I could smell the sour reek of his sweat and the musk of his fear.

"We have no fisheaters here. You mistake us for the drug-crazed visionaries of Cui-ui." Cui-ui was a Dark Town in distant Nevada whose neutrals assiduously consumed fish, careful to keep the watery reek on their breath at all times for a casual inspection too disgusting to contemplate.

"Cui-ui," he whispered. "I *am* of Cui-ui. What is this place?"

I studied him carefully. Narrow face, dark protuberant eyes glinting in my city's dim shadows. No body hair at all, skin slick as skimmed fat. And he was dressed in lumpy gray robes no more attractive than his person. His breath certainly stank of fish.

"Perhaps you are of Cui-ui," I said, "but that buys you no right of passage in Ooze. If your story is worthy, I might listen to it, but first you must rid yourself of perversion."

At Sinister's point, I forced him to clean up the disgusting but strangely alluring food – the smells tempted me toward his sweet filth – dumping it back into a little box that had broken open in a tumble

he seemed to have taken down the fifth ladderway. When he was done I dimmed my shadow suit's noctilucence, sheathed the Blade Sinister, and nudged my little Cui-ui dead man into motion. We would go talk awhile, in a place where my eventual slitting of his throat would be less work for me or the Blade Sinister.

He was a pervert – I would take him to a comestitorium.

"We were sent to Paducah," said the little dead man huddled on the bench. "Something there was wanted by Silver-scales stirps back in Cui-ui. They chose fisheaters for the journey."

He shivered, hunched even smaller in the tight, curtained confines of the comestitorium stall. We shared the space, he and I, a tiny hard bench with a little hinged shelf, hung with heavy curtains designed to block both smell and sound.

Some acts, like eating and murder, are best committed alone.

"I have been Above," I said, surprising myself with a twinge of sympathy. "The world of the map is…challenging."

"Inside a little truck alone among ourselves it was not so bad," he admitted, looking up at me. "Until we stopped to ea – " He caught his words.

"You learn fast." An easy lie. He was a fool.

"Ooze is not unknown in Cui-ui."

"The rest of the world takes a different view than we do here of certain bodily functions," I said, "but I am of a progressive bent, and traveled besides. You have nothing more to fear for your words."

"Just my life," the fisheater said, hunching tighter. "A clown attacked us in the parking lot of Denny's, killed two of my fellows, then dropped me down here. As I fell I thought I would die, wondered why I already hadn't. Then I bounced through nets and webbing, which finally stopped my fall. It took a while, but I struggled through that tangled mess to the streets. You know the rest." He paused, then shivered. "I just want to go home."

No wonder those Fine-Icers wanted to kill him at the Seats of Ease, I thought. His story reeks of their negligence. No one should have escaped the capture nets unobserved. "Tell me more about this clown."

"He was terrible, pale and fat, and he moved like an eel. Teeth like one, too."

"Did he say anything?"

The little dead man actually smiled there, his teeth gleaming slightly in the dark of the booth. "'Aaaarrgh,' mostly. But he said it a lot. Until he threw me down this hole. As he did it, he yelled, 'Tell the Lizard I'm coming.'"

"Hmm." My left hand drifted to the hilt of the Blade Sinister. This would be the time to kill my visitor, and sluice the resultant mess through the cloaca in the floor of our comestitorial stall.

But why would a clown threaten our Lizard? The greatest monster of our Stygian depths, within whose jaws we all dwell, the Lizard of Ooze is older than the rocks around it and more terrible than the fires of the sun.

His story bore further investigation. As a result, it bought him some more life. "We must go to the Gillikins," I announced.

"Does this mean I live?" Hope crept into the little dead man's voice.

"Doubtful," I said. "The Gillikins are the stirps charged with propitiating the depths." The same depths in which we Shadows hunted monsters. We of Ooze are ever practical, ready to rely on one solution when another fails.

He gathered his little food box and followed me.

In my grandfather's time an itinerant window dresser found his way to Ooze from the Cities of the Map. Such a thing is rare but not unknown, though Ooze gets fewer visits than more accessible Dark Towns. Being somewhat more persuasive of the value of his life than most outsiders, he was interrogated by the West Witches in lieu of being killed, then lived among the Gillikin priests for a while. Finally he made a spirit journey to see the Lizard, from which he never returned to us.

Our names, though, have come back to us from above in other books and stories. Grandfather always held that somehow this mouthy little man with a talent for words had talked his way past even our greatest guardian-monster and on into the outside world.

I have stood upon one of the Lizard's crystalline teeth and smelled

the slow, planetary cycle of its breath, scented as it is with cold granite, hot rock, and the nostalgic odor of time. I even saw the blink of one eye, lid crashing like a landslide down a glistening curved wall riven with more colors than even the flowers of the sunlit earth might know.

And still it took all my skill, wit, weaponry and luck to escape with my life, to become a Shadow of the Shadow stirps. I do not believe any single man unaided and unprepared can stand before the Lizard, least of all some bobble-headed wordsmith who got lost on his long, slow way to Kansas.

Nor some little fisheater from Cui-ui in distant Nevada.

I grinned at the thought of seeing the dead man try.

The Gillikin priests lived in a daub-and-wattle temple clinging to the base of one of Ooze's deepest towers, far down in permanent shadow. It was a great messy affair, most resembling a giant agglomeration of bug spit and bird shit, constantly maintained by slaves and limerocks who climb about it unharnessed. If one falls, and damages the wall on the way down, their family is fined the cost of repairs.

Other than the temple itself, the fungal glow of the lower walls of Ooze and the very faint stirrings of sun and moonlight from high above are the only illumination permitted within the temple precincts.

The temple entrance was a triangular gate of bones, thin and graceful, relics of some ice-age teratornis that had once flown proud over the glaciers of Kentucky in the early days of Ooze. Small rivets were set into the rising legs of the gate, each tiny metal head looped back to support silver chains interlinked with black opals and bluish amber, which in turn glittered from the flickering light of oil lamps within, so the Gillikin temple was warded by a curtain of stars.

We passed through the silver-chained curtain, my little dead man and I, and presented ourselves to Brother Porter. He was a wrinkled man, longer in body than I by a head and more, but bent beneath age and long service so we saw eye to eye, his bristly, rheumy-eyed head swinging on the bone-knobbed crane of his neck. His rough linen robe matched the dried-mud interior of the antechamber, which was lit by flickering oil lamps.

"Here there then, little Shadow man," he said to me, his voice raddled as his face and body. "The Lizard's writ runs here more than its blood." One quavering hand poked toward my Blades. "What would you be having of us, Mister Two-Knives? None enters here without price."

I bowed, brushing my hands across the Blades Sinister and Truth before presenting empty palms. "A stranger is come among us, with a message for Its Scaliness. I thought to present him to the priesthood rather than sending the wretch straight down the hole on his own. He is my blood price."

"Kindness in generosity, Shadow," muttered Brother Porter. He swung to face the Cui-ui fisheater, whose face had grown blank with a whole new layer of terror. "And you are wanting to die slow or fast, in glory or in peace?"

"Please, sir," said the little dead man. "I'd prefer not to die at all."

"Coward," said Brother Porter.

"Easily said at your age," I told him. "Please ring up Wall-Eye or Thintail. Not one of the scalebrains."

Scalebrains were Gillikin priests so far descended into contemplation of the Lizard of Ooze that they had achieved permanent communion with the great old reptile, and were not much good anymore for conversation, let alone enlightenment. For one, they often tried to bite people who spoke to them.

"Aye, and before ya I'll place them." Brother Porter shuffled off behind a leather curtain, speaking in some gravelly place deep within his throat that produced no more words, only a sense of pained finality. There followed a muffled echoing of bells, different pitches and tempi, part of the secret language of the Gillikin priests of which I knew only a little.

I understood him to warn someone of visitors, then made a request I could not follow – sending for one of the priests, I presumed. Bells answered, Brother Porter coughed, the antechamber fell silent except for the whimpered breathing of the little dead man.

After a while the leather curtain stirred, and Wall-Eye stepped into the antechamber. Wall-Eye was my favorite Gillikin priest, a man with whom I could almost have a normal conversation, a man who seemed to understand more of the world than what lay before his eyes.

A man who'd once pulled me out of a bad scrape in the far depths below Ooze, for no better reason than curiosity.

He was tall, thin like a razor, his left arm and leg made of metal, as well as the conical plate atop his skull – all legacies of the Lizard – dressed in a robe sewn from dozens of little diamond-shaped scraps of fabric in imitation of the outer curtain of the temple.

On seeing me, Wall-Eye's smile opened, the leather strips woven into each of his lips crackling as he grinned. One eye glinted dark in the oil lamps, the other was milky-white and rolling wildly. "Shadow Astur, as I still breathe. And you have brought me a guest." Hands of flesh and metal rubbed together while a tongue that seemed as dry and rough as his lip-leather licked about the corners of his mouth.

"Our guest bears a threat against the Lizard," I said. Behind the curtain, Brother Porter stopped his rustling about, but I went on. "I felt that you should hear it from his own lips before I dispose of him."

Wall-Eye leaned back slightly, tilting his head to study the fisheater. "He looks healthy enough."

"For one, he does not belong here. He was practicing his perversions in public to boot."

"Ah," said Wall-Eye. "There you have it. Tell me your story, then, fisheater."

The little dead man glanced at me, took a deep breath, and stammered through his brief tale once more.

"The clown concerns me," said Wall-Eye. He and I stood on the narrow platform just outside the glowing curtain of the Gillikin temple. Inside, Brother Porter kept an eye or two on the fisheater.

"Why?"

"There are stirpes within stirpes, as you well know. The College of Clowns is one of the oldest stirpes, and they may have gone feral."

There were feral individuals, and rarely, feral stirpes, and even a few feral Dark Towns. New Orleans, for one, born in twisted shadow and the eternal power and pain of the Dark Towns, only to come into the light when it revealed itself to the Frenchman Bienville, who was canny

enough to claim its founding. A wild city gone tame, its coiled natural violence straightened in service of ordinary men.

But most ferals simply faded. "Then let them be," I said. "I do not see how a few simple threats concern us."

Wall-Eye shook his head, staring out into the gloaming. "The college prospers and grows, feeding on the Dark Towns the way our towns feed on the Cities of the Map. But their painted eyes have never before turned towards Ooze."

"A strange look it is they cast upon us, if they favor us with that little whiner by way of introduction."

"Perhaps it is an accident." He smiled at me, the leather laces of his lips creaking. "Perhaps there is more to our little friend. We will take the little fisheater to see the Lizard. Let it decide. Are you prepared to wager life and limb on this little jaunt?"

We. I drew a deep breath. A Shadow is supposed to fear nothing, least of all the Lizard. But I know my own heart; beneath my shadow suit I am a man. The pit below frightened me, where shadows had teeth and the rocks sometimes walked. Fear twisted in my gut like a snake swallowed whole.

Easier to shiv the little fisheater and have done with him.

But that was my fear speaking.

I looked up from staring at my chest to meet Wall-Eye's gaze. His milky eye seemed to see right through me. The old priest knew what was in my heart.

"I…" *Quiet,* I told myself, then gently stroked my shadow suit. It was my lot in life to be without fear, even though it was a lie. Besides which, I had brought this on myself. I would never have come this deep if a simple death were all our visitor warranted.

"Life is risk," I finally said.

Wall-Eye nodded. He did not condemn me for what was in my heart, and I silently blessed him for that.

And so I mounted the Descending Stair for the second time in my life, to walk the depths armed only with the Blades Sinister and Truth, and my voice of winds. Like blades made flesh, Wall-Eye walked to my

left, just behind my shoulder, while the little dead man walked behind me to my right.

I fancied I could hear their hearts pounding as loud as my own.

Past the Gillikin temple, it is a terrible journey further down the hole of Ooze. The priests generally make the trip in rope-slung baskets, though that seems far too much like Lizard bait for my ease. The Descending Stair is in part carved out of the walls of Ooze's shaft, and in part hammered together from scrap lumber, rope, and softer things, so that it slings outward in a certain dark grandeur of swaying rot.

An unfortunate circumstance, for the sake of one's footing.

We passed through ruined decking, layers of the greatness that once was Ooze still filling this hole like a leg fills a stocking – shattered balconies and mud walls, great burn scars and empty spaces where people betimes walked and talked and lived their lives deep in shadow. All of it dead beyond years, nothing more now than memories scarcely discernible even by the light of our torches.

Down there, the air is hot and still, water is scarce despite the cloying damp, and rumblings can be heard from farther below. I know the Lizard lives at the bottom of this great, deep hole. Our great monster is as big as it needs to be. Some have told of resting an arm upon the cracked dome of its wizened skull, while others have danced along its teeth and dodged between legs the size of watchtowers. Still others have seen that great eye, huge and patient as years, that would bespeak a body the size of mountains.

It is real, the Lizard of Ooze, as real as we, for all that its form is mutable to the point of imaginary. The Lizard's shape and size follow no logic but that of fear and desire. I was reminded of this, because above all memory and reason, we could hear its roar as we descended. My heart raced, but I marched onward.

As the fourth hour of our descent came to a close, Wall-Eye called a halt. "Each to his own needs," he said quietly, loathe to stir echoes. This was our time to eat, covering our respective shame with a headcloth, and chewing as quietly as anatomy and hunger would allow. I shooed the fisheater a dozen steps further down, then covered myself to suckle

on a salted stick of pork fat and mushroom. Though I closed my ears from decent necessity, the hideous smack of the stranger's enjoyment echoed up the steps.

I kept my anger inside and my hands away from my Blades. This was an outlander, dead but still walking, and there was no point. He was not a hole-dweller like us, his entire life inverted as I understood the life of Ooze to be. The stirpes liked to say it made us better than the world, but having been Above I had my doubts. Different is not always superior.

After satisfying the base lusts of our guts, we cleaned ourselves and resumed our journey. The Lizard thrashed and roared far below, but the fisheater seemed resigned to his fate, and demonstrated no alarm. Eventually the noises settled, combining with the echo of rushing water to seem natural, until the walkway let us out on a round-shouldered ledge past which streamed a cataract, its foam glowing in the dark.

I did not remember this ledge or the waterfall from my initiatory journey as a Shadow, but this was the nature of Ooze—to change, and change again, so that with a turn of the head the world would be different.

Who would want to live in a ruler-straight city girded by concrete and stone, when this life was before them?

"Water," said the fisheater. "Blood and bone of Cui-ui." He grinned, his teeth sparkling in our torchlight, somehow straighter and taller now in the presence of his totemic element. "Even here you cannot escape the power of the fish."

Then the water spoke, as did the stones, and the very air itself.

"Who-o-o-o-o-o?" it said, slow and low.

My heart raced anew, and my legs felt soft and weak. But Wall-Eye bowed toward the darkness of the pit to our right, the hole in which the Lizard dwelt. "We come in simplicity, seeking wisdom," he called in a clear voice. "We come in fear, seeking hope. We come in humility, seeking pride."

Out in the darkness, something flashed, a fang as tall as I. Blood would be spilled, likely mine. My breath caught in my throat. Courage did not lie in lack of fear, rather it lay in passing fear by.

"Why-y-y-y-y-y?"

"One was sent."

Then the fisheater screamed and leapt across the torrent, vanishing into a darkness ever more glittering with tall, toothy knives.

Wall-Eye spun, jabbed me in the chest with his metal arm that clattered with the motion. "What is this insanity?" he demanded.

"I do not know!" I understood my duty – to leap screaming after the fisheater. My legs would not move.

The Gillikin priest shoved me in the chest. "You are the Shadow. Stalk the darkness."

Not trusting myself to words, I nodded, then drew the Blades Sinister and Truth. My legs wobbled, then strength returned with a settling of my heart as I took a running jump past my slinking sense of fear into the darkness after my little dead man.

Into the maw of the Lizard.

The Dark Towns can be seen as imagined involutions of heat and pain and flickering life. Perhaps they arose from the dreaming mind of Earth, perhaps from our own whirling distractions. Perhaps they simply willed themselves into being. In either case, Dark Towns are where the real and the dream are woven into a single fabric, a continuum of sensibility that scales quickly past reason in times of deep shadow or blood-boiling fear. The Dark Towns are the night mind of the world.

Right now the night mind was in a killing mood.

We tumbled, the Lizard, the fisheater and I, within a fountain of water. One moment the air was firm like a stepping stone, then it was a falling sinkhole the next. Small as I had ever heard it to be, the Lizard flashed, scales dark to the point of nothingness, teeth now gleaming fire-bright. It was no bigger than a man, no bigger than I. The fisheater flew as if he had been born a bird, swelling in his flight, his skin rippling, his robes bursting at the seams.

As Wall-Eye had suspected, this was no terrified little pervert from the surface. I tumbled toward the invader, trying to reach him before he did some greater damage. My life was no longer at issue – the Lizard was under direct attack.

An attack I had brought to bear.

I had failed as a Shadow.

Even as I snagged the hem of the fisheater's robe, it tore loose. His sallow skin and straggled hair rippled and shredded away into something bright and terrible. It was like seeing a jeweled beetle erupt from a rotten pupa – where there had been a little man, lost and afraid, there was now a ruby-suited clown with the head of a black dog and hands made from dozens of knives.

I had my Blades two and true to face him, and into battle I pushed through the falling water over the racing of my heart.

The Lizard snapped and roared, turning the water to steam as the ruby-suited clown slashed at its flanks. The clown's suit glowed like bright blood, so I could not see what wounds he might take. I chose instead to slash at his ears, stabbing with the Blade Sinister, catching crosswise with the Blade Truth.

I took a length of steel for my trouble, my shadow suit rippling as it tried to accept the blow before passing the edge through to the skin of my thigh. In this airy place, the battlefield of Ooze's imagination, I rolled away from the cut, receiving a ragged slash in lieu of the muscle-tearing wound intended for me.

My second slash at the ruby-suited clown's ear was more successful, setting a silky, pink-lined flap of fur to float free in the curtain of water. I flipped the Blade Truth in my hand and used my fingers on the hilt to retrieve the scrap, barely escaping disembowelment as I did.

Then the Lizard finally awoke to its task, swelling ever larger with the anger and disease of Ooze's thirty thousand souls to engulf the head of ruby-suited clown within flaring, flaming jaws. I stabbed again at the clown's feet, trying for an Achilles tendon or at least an arch, but the Lizard worried the clown as a rat might worry at a terrier within its jaws. My blow went wild and I tumbled away.

The teeth came for me next, clown lost or forgotten. I rolled, scrambling through the falling water to dodge. I would not fight the Lizard, for the Lizard was Ooze. Though it could kill me, I could no more harm it than harm myself.

The snap of jaws missed me, tearing at the leg of my shadow suit to

raise a shower of pink and yellow sparks. Rolling, I could not see the clown. Absent my target, my fear returned. I could not leave, not yet, for I had to see the Lizard safe.

I twisted away again, readying my blade. The Lizard's jaws yawned tunnel-wide as it swept toward me. A bright spark gleamed deep inside its throat.

The clown.

I took a great breath, faced my fear one last time, and let the Lizard swallow me.

I stumbled on the rough tongue, struggling against the hot gasp of the Lizard's breath, then raced toward the spark. The clown was there, gnawing at the wall of the Lizard's gullet with its dog-headed jaws.

The Lizard could not fight something that attacked from within.

Blades flashing, I broke into a forward roll, letting the brilliance of my shadow suit draw the clown's blow. Steel still struck as it had done before, sprouting from the clown's hand like a thorn from a vine, but in my side rather than my heart.

I accepted the pain, pushed myself down the blade, and set Truth against one of the clown's wild yellow eyes while Sinister came from beneath to cut the strings of his hams.

The clown yowled, his voice a dog's, as he collapsed. His next blow missed me, wide with the loss of his balance. Then I realized the hot wind of the Lizard's breath was blowing in, not out. The tongue beneath my feet rippled, the walls of the throat likewise.

The lizard was swallowing the clown. I had done what I could, it was time to fear for my own life. I gathered myself and shouted in the voice of winds, "Away!"

The Lizard roared, expelling me to tumble upward in the darkness. I had banished myself with my words, and fell onto the ledge at Wall-Eye's feet.

"Fool," said Wall-Eye. He nudged me with a metal toe.

"It is over," I said. The clown's warm dog ear pulsed in my hand, wrapped around Truth's haft.

"The Lizard is Gillikin business, not Shadow business."

I sat up, testing my wounds, inspecting the shadow suit's tears. The

pain wavered through me like the Lizard's peristalsis, threatening to swallow me whole all over again. I needed to hold my own with Wall-Eye, though. Gasping, I said, "I hunt those things which the dark sends us."

"The clown came from above," the priest pointed out.

A great shriek echoed from far below, as the cataract suddenly abated to a mossy dribble. Then a flash of red light pulsed in the darkness.

We smiled at one another. The Lizard had once again defended Ooze, albeit with my help.

"If the clown somehow comes back up," I said, "he is mine." My breathing still labored, I folded the ear into a pouch at my waist – it would count for something if ever another clown came to call.

The old priest helped me to my feet. I saw the Lizard for a moment in Wall-Eye's gaze, and surely he saw the same in mine. We stood with the taste of clown in our mouths before ascending, he with his anger and me with the stumbling, pained gift of my life, in silent brotherhood to the curtained door of the Gillikin priests and all of lovely, dark Ooze beyond.

Watson's Boy

BRIAN EVENSON

> ...behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it....
> – *Revelations 3:8*

[ONE]

His Keys.

HE CARRIES two hundred and thirty-five rings of keys. His father has constructed harnesses for him to loop over his arms, chest, and waist, upon which the keys hang. The harnesses consist of heavy canvas straps, oversewn and strung with hooks.

When he walks, the keys rattle upon his flesh, making his skin tingle. He tries the keys in the locks. The keys do not seem to fit the locks. He continues on, to other doors.

It once gave Brey particular satisfaction to run through dark hallways, the keys sounding against his body. Now he does not run, but lumbers. The increasing weight of keys stunts his movement, cripples his growth. He does not resent this – he does not realize it. According to his father's calculations, when Brey gathers five hundred keys the load will become too heavy. His spine will snap. His father suggests that he should stop at four hundred, and for that reason has equipped the harness with only four hundred hooks. Brey, however, has realized that each hook can be bent to hold two rings of keys. If he continues to collect keys, Brey will someday find himself lying on the ground with a broken back, calling for his father quietly, as if embarrassed.

*

The keys seem as regular a fixture of the halls as the doors. They are covered with dust where the halls are dusty. They are free from dust where the halls are clean.

He does not know if the halls will continue to exist when all the keys are removed from their intersections. He experiments to discover if, once the keys are gone, the halls will disappear. Perhaps, he believes, they will vanish from around him, allowing him an infinitely open space.

The discovery of a set of keys invokes in him a series of gestures. He picks up the keys. He examines them, assures himself that they resemble the other keys he has found. He hangs the keys from a hook of his harness, then returns to his rooms, trying the new keys in the familiar doors along the way.

If keys exist, doors must exist which they will unlock. Such is the nature of the key. Such is the nature of the door.

He has travelled through two hundred and thirty-six intersections and in the center of each has found keys. He does not know how many intersections exist. He has reached one outer, terminal wall, beyond which he cannot progress. For this reason, he suspects that the halls are not infinite.

His father thinks differently. "Everything is a passage," he says, "though not every passage leads somewhere."

His father has never been wrong. Brey tries to push his way through the terminal wall. The wall seems solid, essential in every regard. His fingers find no passage. He gives up.

His father instills within Brey his respect for keys. His father tells him:

"The keys are in the hallways, at every intersection. I have never collected keys. If you collect them, I shall be pleased. If you choose not to collect them, I shall not question your choice."

His Hallways.

The floors of his halls are polished, black stone. The walls are rough, gray stone, as are the ceilings. His hallways are extensive, forming per-

fect grids. Each hall between the intersections has ten doors upon each side. Each door is distanced from the next by two spans of Brey's arms – one and one half spans of his father's arms. The halls are lit by light bulbs hanging single and naked over the intersections. The bulbs are of various wattage, and expire periodically. In certain intersections, the halls are nearly dark, lit only by light bulbs four intersections distant. In other intersections, the halls are brightly lit, the polished floors glistening as if wet. There, the light bulbs are globes, larger than he imagines his brain to be.

The terminal wall is different. On the terminal wall, there are only doors on the inner side of the hall. On the outer side, in the place of doors, windows have been cut into the stone. The windows are filled with glass. The glass is black, opaque, but shiny enough that in it Brey sees his own ghost.

The hall ahead grows dark, the light bulb broken or missing. Brey travels by touch through the dim, unreeling his fishline. He has always been afraid of the dark. He counts ten doors, feels the wall sheer off before him.

He sets the reel of fishline aside. He eases down to his knees, sweeps his hands forward across the floor until they brush something. He fumbles a ring of keys from the floor, ticks off the keys upon it. There are seven keys. This is true of all rings of keys, an essential quality of rings of keys. He can count on it.

He returns, following the fishline back to the tenth door. He wraps the fishline around the handle of the door, sets the reel down on the ground. He follows the fishline backward, stopping before each door to try each of his seven keys in the lock.

The walls are rough. He uses them to scrape the dead skin from his elbows. He has not discovered either graft or joint in the wall. To Brey, the walls seem carved from a single block of stone. Perhaps his father would disagree.

The floors are smooth. Echoes rise from the soles of his boots. The walls and floor might be carved from the same stone, though the one

is polished while the other is not. Why one might be polished and the other not, Brey cannot guess. For him, they may as well be different types of stone.

Brey was born in the halls, as was Brey's father. What occupied the halls before them, Brey cannot say. If Brey's father knows, he keeps it a secret, perhaps for Brey's own good. If his father knew and if it were important, Brey knows his father would tell him. Brey does not need to know.

The Doors in His Halls.

The doors in his halls are all locked. They seem to him identical. He has measured himself against the doors. The doorways are large enough to admit him, but little larger. There is a handsbreadth of space to either side of his shoulders, two handsbreadths above his head. His father, on the other hand, must stoop to fit within the doorframe.

The doors are made of unvarnished wood. Four of the doors are unlocked. All of the other doors are locked. Excepting the bedroom door, the doors which are unlocked hinge inward. The hinges lie hidden, cradled in stone.

He feels his way along the dark hallway. He stops to lean against the wall. He disentangles the fishline from around the door handle, heaves up the reel.

He carries the reel with both hands, resting it against his thighs. The weight of it digs the keys into his legs. He travels forward, unspooling the fishline.

He drops the reel. He kicks the keys out of the intersection, nearer to the wall. Bracing his body against the wall, he squats down, steadying one hand upon the reel. He takes the keys from the floor. In standing, as his father has taught him, he looks up at the ceiling. The purpose of this, Brey does not know.

Sick, Brey feels the weight of the keys. The hallways are cold. He drags his shoulders and face along the wall, shivering.

He drags his face too heavily. His skin abrades, breaks, bleeds, old scars splitting back.

Brey would be handsome, but his face is scarred. He would be handsome had not his growth been stumped by the keys. Brey would be handsome, if the word had any significance for him.

Brey's father never carried keys. His face once was smooth. He was gathered up to a colossal height.

Now he is old. His face is puckered and wrinkled. His back is stooped. But he is still taller than Brey.

Brey turns accidental circles in the dark hallways, reversing his course. He reaches a previous intersection whose keys he has removed. He leans against the wall, catching his breath.

He feels the floor for keys. He finds nothing.

He keeps stooping, keeps searching.

"Father?" he yells. "Father?"

He carries three hundred and fifty-seven pounds of keys upon his body. If he falls to the ground, he will find it difficult to rise. If he is injured in the fall, he will lie upon the ground until he starves or until he thinks to remove the keys so as to stand.

He stumbles across the intersection, strikes the opposite wall. Leaning against the wall, he moves forward. He counts doors as he passes them, continuing toward new intersections.

Of doors, there are two possibilities. Perhaps the doors were made at the same time as the halls. Perhaps the doors were cut later. There is no evidence to allow Brey to favor either one hypothesis or the other. But he prefers the former.

His Room.

The frame of his bed stands beside the door. His body is too heavy for it. Next to it is spread a palette. He sleeps upon the palette in clothes and keys, adjacent to the frame.

His bed frame rises into a rickety canopy. Shredded fabric hangs from it, seemingly held together by cobwebs and dust.

On the opposite side of the room are a broken chair, a desk, and several notebooks. Each notebook begins with a single map of the hallways which he has explored. Following are scores of theoretical maps, numerous postulated sets of hallways.

His walls are bare. In the ceiling is a bank of twelve light bulbs, cradled in a depression of stone, bulbs abutted one to another. Five of the light bulbs have failed, two during Brey's lifetime. Brey will never forget the drama of those moments. The remaining light bulbs stay lit while Brey is awake, switching off when he lays down to sleep. The mechanism that regulates the light remains obscure to him.

Attached to the desk is a strand of fishline which wraps around the leg of the desk four times before being tied off. The line runs out under the door, down the hall, through empty intersections, toward the terminal wall. The line is neither taut nor loose.

He sits cross-legged upon his palette, pouring over his maps. All the maps partake of the same design, making it difficult to distinguish one map from another. If Brey's imagined maps were not clearly marked, he would find it difficult to distinguish them from his real map.

His imaginary maps contain imaginary keys in each intersection. All maps are gridwork. All are recorded on equally sized sheets of squared paper. The only difference between them is where Brey marks the location of the terminal doors.

The terminal doors are recorded on the imagined maps but have not yet been discovered in the hallways. The terminal doors exist on terminal walls, breaking the succession of blacked windows. The terminal doors stretch to the ceiling. They are two large, varnished doors, locked together. No light departs through their bottom crack. Some little light comes through the locks, outlining them, suggesting that something exists beyond. An eye to the keyhole, Brey believes, would reveal only an elaborate gearage.

The terminal doors must lead out of the halls. Otherwise Brey would not call them "terminal."

Perhaps through the terminal doors lies another set of hallways, organized according to principles of which his own halls are merely a shadow. The terminal doors exist: they have been discovered on all maps, excepting the actual map. Thus, they must eventually be discovered on the actual map. Thus, reasons Brey, they must be discovered in the halls themselves.

Before he collects all the keys, he hopes to find the terminal doors. When he finds them, he will attempt to escape through them.

Perhaps the terminal doors are hidden in a dark section of hallway. Perhaps he has walked by them, pressed against the opposite wall, again and again, unaware.

He returns to his room to find the door ajar, his father standing over his desk, thumbing through his map books.

"Brey, will you explain what these are?" says his father.

"Notebooks?" says Brey.

"You know what I mean," says his father.

"Maps?" says Brey.

"Maps?" says his father, crumpling them. "Maps of what, Brey? These are useless."

His Parents.

His parents live in the room adjacent to his own. They are withered of skin, but not of mind. They are the source of all his knowledge. His mother never leaves the room. His father rarely is to be found in the room. He wanders.

Brey has wrapped his mother's body with strips of sheets to protect her from rats. He has done thus at his father's request. Brey has never seen rats. He has read about them at length, and has learned about them from his father. His father wanders the halls looking for evidence of the rats.

"The rats," his father confides, "exist! I have seen them, Brey. Someday they will return to these halls."

Brey has not seen the rats. He has seen drawings of rats in his father's books about rats. He believes in the rats, though he has not seen them. He trusts his father.

"Your mother and I have killed rats," says his father. "Someday they will return for me or for your mother. I am still capable of running from them. Your mother is not. If she is disguised in sheets, however, they might pass her by."

If the rats do discover Brey's mother, they might find it difficult to chew through her wrappings. It might take them long enough to chew through the sheets that they would choose instead to search out other bodies. Brey's body, for example, or that of his father. Brey's father can run from the rats. Brey can lumber from them. If he is not fast enough to escape, his keys might still protect him.

Even if the rats chew through his mother's sheets, they will chew through at only one spot. The rats will stream into his mother through the single hole, eating the body hollow. If Brey surprises the rats, he will be able to sew the hole shut. The rats will be trapped. They will suffocate within his mother.

No one shall wrap Brey in sheets when he grows feeble. There is nobody to do it. He will be easy prey to rats.

When he approaches death, he will hang himself from one of the light fixtures in the hallway, out of reach of the rats. Perhaps he will collect enough keys that his entire body will be covered, armored against rats. A smart rat, however, will snout past the keys.

The wrapped feet of Brey's mother hang over the edge of her bed. His mother says little, almost never speaking directly to Brey. His father claims, however, that she asks about him often. That she is concerned about him.

His father tells him things about keys, about halls, nothing else. His father says this of the keys: "There are two ways to get the keys: you can collect the keys or you can wait for them to collect you. I have done the latter. The keys have not come. I have no regrets—there are things more important than keys."

His Knowledge.

His mother tells him little about herself. He knows that she has always been in these halls, little more. His father is modest, speaking seldom of

his own accomplishments. He knows of his father no more than he can gather from his father's commentary on rats, halls, keys. There are only stories of rats, elaborate rat traps, his father's refusal to collect keys: "If I had it to do again, I would change nothing. I do not believe in regret. Nevertheless, I wonder if you should reconsider your own course."

His knowledge of his father lies in his father's drawings and poems. His father has mentioned thousands of drawings, of rats. Brey has found only a single sheet of paper with two ink drawings upon it, plastered underneath the sink. The lines are faint, but the shapes of rats are still trapped there.

Often, Brey himself traces rats on the table with his fingers. In this, he considers himself his father's child.

He has torn pages from his notebook and drawn pictures of rats upon them, leaving them scattered through the intersections for his father to find. The drawings have disappeared, but his father has never said anything about them. Perhaps the drawings are good enough that Brey's father thinks they are his own. Perhaps the rats find them first, destroying them.

His father's poems are in a slim volume labelled *Homage to Brey: (He Has Chosen to Collect Keys).* His father said nothing to Brey of the book's existence. Brey discovered it in his parents' room while his father was wandering, his mother asleep. The book was wedged between the headboard and the wall. He slid the book from its hiding place, apparently without his mother and father's knowledge, and conveyed it into his room to hide under his palette. At times, as he sleeps, he thinks he feels the shape of it beneath him. His father has never mentioned its absence.

There are forty-six poems in the book. Brey knows they are poems because below each title is written the words "A Poem." Since he has stolen the book, Brey does not dare discuss the poems with his father. The poems are about rats. None of the poems scan. None rhyme. Nonetheless, Brey is moved. He is secretly proud of his father.

The halls contain myriad sounds. He has the sounds of his boots in the halls, the echo of his fists upon the windows, the jangle of his keys, the

drip of his water, the hum of his light bulbs, the sound of his father's footsteps, fading. When a light bulb expires, the light sputters and offers an ecstatic sound, much rarer. Then a hall falls dark, silent.

At times there is the sound of his father's voice in the halls. In the past, his mother's voice as well. Now his mother's voice does not leave its room.

His father never says: "I have written poems, and this is what they mean."

His father says, "Brey, I am not here for your benefit. I am your father, but I am other things besides a father. I will help you as I can, but I will not sacrifice myself to you."

His father says, "Let's speak frankly. Do you think collecting keys is the best choice for you, Brey?"

His Kitchen.

His kitchen is a room panelled in white plastic, panels stretching from ceiling to floor. Where two panels meet, a metal strip covers the crack. The walls, when soiled, can be wiped clean with damp cloth.

Each sheet of the wall hides a pantry. To reveal the pantry, one must grasp the metal strip at a designated point, pulling outward. The pantries are expansive. There has always been enough food for Brey and for his parents.

His father says of the stove in one of his poems, "Once it was a great truth." What this means, Brey does not pretend to know. He is not privy to the truths of a stove.

The faucet handles of the sink have sheared off, but the gaskets remain relatively intact. Water drips slowly from the cracked spigot. Beneath the spigot, Brey has placed a pewter cup. When it fills with water, he pours it into a canteen.

It takes several hours for the cup to fill. As his journeys through the halls become lengthier, the cup sometimes overflows and water is lost. He collects a cup of water when he leaves to walk the halls, a cup when he returns to sleep. He does not know if his father and mother drink from his cup while he is gone. Brey is not dying of thirst by any means, yet he is often thirsty.

There is a table in the kitchen. Under the table is a paper sack. When the sack is full of garbage, Brey surreptitiously dumps it into one of the hallways.

On the table are stacked four books: *The Rat, Rats: All About Them, Our Friend the Rat,* and *How to Build a Better Mousetrap.* His father's name has been written inside each front cover, though Brey has had the books as long as he can remember.

Brey has read these books, studying the pictures carefully. He knows the rat. He is prepared.

His Tiles.

The floor of the bathroom is covered with thousands of identical square tiles. Brey has transformed this floor into a map, placing scraps of cardboard at the intersections of the tiles. He has found one hundred and twelve sets of keys traveling to the terminal wall, one hundred and twenty-nine more traveling along the terminal wall. Assuming that the halls form a quadrangle, there are a minimum of fourteen thousand four hundred and forty-eight sets of keys in the halls. Of these he can expect to collect five hundred – approximately three and one-half percent.

He wets his finger in the bowl of the toilet, rubs it against his skin. Dirt and dead skin flake away. His father continues to warn him against using the toilet in this fashion. "Sanitation, son, is not a game." Brey sees no alternative.

His Windows and Walls.

His windows line the terminal walls. They are textureless, black, opaque. He has tried to scrape their darkness away with his keys. The keys slip from the glass without leaving a scratch.

He pounds on the glass with both fists. When he strikes the glass, it vibrates. The vibration is not unlike the sound of his boots striking the floor.

He stops pounding, presses his ear against the glass. He hears nothing.

Brey has seen pictures of windows in his rat books. He has seen windows with rats nestling upon their sills. He knows the purpose of win-

dows. They are for rats to look through, a sort of transparent wall. When rats tire, they draw drapes.

He raises his hands to pound on the windows. He feels a hand on his shoulder. He lets his hands fall.

"Brey?" says his father. "Do you think that is wise?"

"Wise?" says Brey.

"Do you wish to attract rats?"

"Rats?" says Brey.

"Are you ready for them?" says his father. "Are you prepared? Brey?" he says. "Brey?"

His Fishline.

The fishline was the gift of his father. It is wound around a wheel-rimmed spool as thick as Brey's torso. The words "20# TEST PREMIUM FISHLINE: 21,120 FEET (APPROX. FOUR MILES)" are stenciled on both wheels of the spool.

Brey does not know what "miles" are. He has never heard nor seen the word "feet" used in this sense before.

His father, explaining, says, "It is called fishline because it is fishline."

His father volunteers nothing more about fishline, only informing Brey that it is fishline. Brey masters this information, makes it his own.

He takes a ring of keys off his belt. Opening the ring's gate, he slips the fishline inside the ring. He hooks the ring back onto his waist.

The fishline whirs past him as he walks, slipping through the eye of the ring, a hiss beneath the clank of keys.

He walks down the halls toward the next set of keys. He picks away a half-scabbed cut on one hand, lengthening it, deepening it. He stops to rinse his hand with water from the canteen. The water drips onto the polished floor, separating into beads. Holding aside the keys that cover his shirt, he presses his hand against the fabric. He wipes the hand dry.

He passes empty intersections, enters dark halls. Light returns, then fades. He trusts to the fishline.

He reaches the last explored intersection. He finds his father there.

"Hello, Brey," his father says.

He and Brey shake hands.

"Are you sure that collecting keys is the right choice?" says his father. "Are you prepared for every contingency?"

Brey nods, passes through the intersection. Beyond, the halls grow brighter still. He approaches the next intersection.

He hesitates, halts. Allows his eyes to adjust.

The intersection is heaped ankle-deep with dust. No keys are visible.

Brey hesitates. He turns away. The intersection behind him is empty, his father gone.

[TWO]

His Dust.

The dust meshes and thickens as it approaches the intersection, coming together in a solid sheet at the near edge, thickening as it moves in. He turns away, follows the fishline back the way he came.

His father absent, he consults his mother.

"Where the halls are dusty, the halls are full of dust," says his mother. This can hardly be disputed.

He waits for her to say more. He stands motionless at her bedside, watching her lips purse and relax as she breathes.

His keys rattle as he walks toward the door. He hears his mother behind, calling for his father. He opens the door and goes out, pretending not to hear.

In his room, pinned to the mattress, a note from his father:

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Father.

What ashes are Brey does not know. Dust he knows. Father he knows.

He tears a square of paper from a page of *Our Friend the Rat.* He drops it onto the tiles to mark the intersection.

On his written maps, he marks dust-filled intersections with the letter "d." He marks dust on the original map of his halls. He does not mark dust on the other maps. He will wait and see.

His Father.

His father squats in an empty intersection, pushing Brey's fishline about with his fingers. Hearing Brey's approach, his father rises to greet him.

"How do you explain this, Brey?" says his father, holding the fishline pinched between two fingers.

"Fishline?" says Brey.

"Unspooled through the halls?" says his father.

"Collecting keys," says Brey.

"Is that what fishline is for?" says his father.

His father stands twirling the fishline, awaiting a response. Brey takes his father's arm, tugs him down the hall.

They stand next to each other, staring at the dust. His father moves to move his arm around Brey. Brey squirms away.

"This is dust, Brey," says his father. "Similar to ash," his father says.

He is on his knees in his parents' room, crawling. He unwinds a strip of sheet from his mother's leg, spreading it flat on the floor. He scrapes together the dust under her bed. He sprinkles it over the strip. Lifting the two ends of the strip off the floor, he shakes the dust down into the middle curve. He twists the strip into a purse, knots it closed, hangs it from a keyhook.

He starts to unravel his mother's other leg. Beneath the strips her skin is mottled and cracked, weeping. She calls out weakly, as if injured. He unravels three broad strips from her legs and crawls away, her cries in his ear.

He soaks the strips in the toilet. He wraps three wet strips of sheet over his face, knotting them together behind his ears. The wet rags adhere to his skin. He gashes holes for his eyes. The top of one strip and the bottom of another strip join at his mouth. When he opens his mouth,

the strips part. When he closes his mouth, the strips join. Water gathers beneath his chin, dripping down onto his keys. Perhaps the water will rust the keys.

The dust thickens beyond the intersection, fingering the walls. The dust gathers thickly near the walls further down, bowing the floor.

From the edge of the intersection, a series of identical marks leads into the dust. The marks are staggered – right, left, right. They lie separated at an equal distance.

Each mark consists of two portions. The first is an elongated ovoid peaked at the front, flat at the back. The second, behind the first and separated from it by a narrow strip of raised dust, is a half circle.

He looks over his shoulder for his father. His father is not behind him. He squats down. With his hand, he wipes out all the marks he can reach.

He takes the bundled cloth from off its hook, unwraps it. Inside is gray dust, finer than the dust of the intersection. He pinches some yellow dust from the floor, sprinkling the dust onto the dust in the bundle.

Behind him, the sound of his father's boots. He knots the bundle shut, stands.

"What happened to your face?" his father says.

Brey feels the wet cloth over his face.

"What do you have in your hand, son?"

Uncurling his fingers, Brey holds up the knotted rag.

"Are these your mother's wrappings, Brey?" says his father, his voice rising.

"This?" says Brey. "She gave it to me?"

Brey unties the bundle with his teeth. Turning his father's palm upward, he fills it with dust.

His father frowns. He opens his fingers, lets the dust trickle out. He brushes his palm against his leg. He takes Brey by the shoulders, turning Brey toward him.

Says his father, "Where did I go wrong?"

*

His Mask.

He steps deep into the intersection. Easing to his knees, he closes his eyes. He slides from one knee to the other, feeling the dust push up before him. He slides his hands in. He fans them over the floor.

His fingers cross something hard. He brings his hands together, feeling the dust billow. He picks up a ring of keys. He straightens his back and stands, moving sideways until he touches a wall. He opens his eyes.

The air of the intersection is dark with dust. His body and boots are coated and dull. The wet rags covering his face have thickened, the dust and dampness forming a paste.

He scrapes the paste from his mouth, folds the cloth back from his lips. He scoops up handfuls of dust, packs them against the damp rags.

He passes water near the wall, mixing a mud of urine and dust with his fingers. He packs his face thick with mud, smoothing it with his palms.

Around him, the dust now lies heaped and swirled. The marks are gone.

Dust to dust, perhaps, Father?

His face grows hard.

He opens the door to his room. His father sits on the palette, his knees gathered in his arms.

"About this mask, Brey," says his father. "Does it have any purpose?"

"Purpose?" says Brey.

"I thought not," says his father, rising.

He opens the door, but turns back.

"By the way, what did you mix with the dust?" his father says.

"Water?" says Brey.

"Water?" says his father. "Not water taken from the sink, Brey."

"Not the sink," Brey admits.

"Where else is there water? The toilet?" says his father. "Good Lord, son, take the mask off."

*

She is asleep. He unwraps her feet, removes her slippers. She mumbles, curls her toes. He places the slippers over his hands, leaves the room.

He attaches himself to the fishline. Before reaching the spool, he leaves the fishline to turn down an unexplored hall. He does not walk far, only far enough to see that there is dust and to retreat.

He returns to the fishline, following it to the first dust-filled intersection. He crosses to the hall beyond. He bends forward, blows breath out of his plaster mouth. The dust before him displaces, leaving a cone-shaped depression. Perhaps, he thinks, air currents and breezes created the marks in the dust.

He kneels. He walks his mother's slippers into the dust. The slippers leave a single-part mark nothing like what he recalls of the two-part original marks.

The marks of his father's boots might be similar to the original. Or a rat could have made the marks, leaping zigzag down the hall. Two rats escaped his father: the marks which were to one side could have been made by one rat, the marks to the other by the other.

Brey does not know if leaping through dust is typical behavior for rats. He consults his rat books, but learns nothing. Brey does not know if leaping through dust is typical behavior for his father. He consults his mother. She does not respond.

"Collecting keys will not always be easy," his father has told him.

Yet his father claims never to have collected keys. How would his father know what is easy, what is hard? Does not Brey know more about keys than his father will ever know?

He struggles up from the palette and into the hall. Slowly, he opens his parents' door.

He bends down, lifts an old pillow from the floor. Holding the pillow in both hands, he approaches the second bed.

He brings the pillow down against his father's face. He pushes the pillow down. He holds the pillow down with both elbows locked. He waits.

Nothing happens. His father does not react.

He lifts the pillow away to regard the face. The face is blinking and serious, very much alive.

"I am concerned about you, Brey," says his father. "Perhaps justifiably."

Brey flees.

The Sounds of His Halls.

Lifting up the spool, he crosses the intersection. Dust adheres to the surface of his mask, streaks his hands and arms.

He drops the spool, stuffs a square of cloth into the mouth of the mask to filter the dust. He continues on. The cloth loses color as he breathes. The cloth becomes a protruding bloodless tongue.

The dust upon the walls dislodges, drifting in a fine mist. He drops the spool. He kneels. He moves forward, eyes closed, hands groping through the dust.

Faint sounds. He ignores them. He finishes with one door, moves to the next. The sounds continue.

The halls might be amplifying a lesser noise: a light bulb sputtering out, a drop of water striking the floor. If not, the sound might be the sound of rats.

His father claims the rats will return. There is no reason to disbelieve his father. He must take precautions.

He returns to his hall. He opens his parents' door. His mother lies in her bed. His father's bed is empty. As his mother turns her head toward him, he draws the door closed.

He breaks apart the frame of his palette. He forces splinters of wood into the crack of his parents' door until the door is wedged shut. He explains to his mother, yelling through the door, that he is doing this *for her own protection.* His father, he cries, *would do the same.*

He opens *How to Build a Better Mousetrap*. He consults a series of schematic drawings in Appendix B.

He unscrews the legs of the kitchen table. He makes of the tabletop a deadfall trap, propping up one end with a table leg. He compares

the drawings to the table, the table to the drawings.

He sets the trap before his door, baiting it with peach preserves. As an added precaution, he mixes shards of glass into the peaches.

He carries a table leg wrapped in cloth stolen from his mother's body. The leg is thick and heavy. The leg fits his hand awkwardly.

He stores several days' worth of food in his bedroom. His canteen is full of water as is his pewter cup. He soaks chips of wood in the toilet, forces them into the cracks of the kitchen door. He leaves his own door and the bathroom door unblocked. He will live in the first room, use the latter's toilet to dispose of dead rats.

Comes a knock at the bedroom door. He rolls off the palette, club in hand. The knock comes again, high on the door. He stands on tiptoe, presses his ear to the door. The knock comes again, slightly above his head.

"Father?" he calls.

There is no answer.

His father would respond to his call. His mother is shut in her room, her door wedged closed. That leaves only the rats. The rats have returned. They are leaping high, throwing their bodies against his door. He knows better than to answer.

The deadfall collapses. He hears muffled sounds, fading. He swings open the door, brandishing the table leg, baring his teeth.

Peach preserves have spurted over the floor. He lifts the tabletop off the ground. He peers under it. Nothing but squashed peaches. The rats have escaped.

He travels through the dust, unspooling the fishline. Dust billows up. He stops, listens for rats. He hears nothing. He continues on.

He squints his eyes, breathing through the cloth over his mouth. He drops to his knees, pushing his hands into the dust. He takes up the keys, stands. He gropes his way to the wall.

He returns. His mother's door is ajar, splinters of wood scattering the floor.

He raises the table leg. He kicks the door open.

His mother lies where he left her, unharmed. Beside her, leaning against the edge of her bed, is his father.

"Come here, Brey," his father says.

Brey hesitates in the doorway, club half-raised.

"This is not a game, dear Brey," says his father. "Am I understood?"

Brey nods. His father rises, takes the table leg from Brey's hand, throws it out into the hall. He raps his knuckles hard against Brey's plaster forehead.

"Brey?" he says. "Brey?"

He turns the tabletop upside down. He sops up the peaches, flushing them down the toilet. He unravels a strip of cloth from his mother while she sleeps. Dipping the cloth into the toilet, he uses it to swab the floor.

Perhaps he can strike a bargain with the rats. Perhaps a truce might not be impossible.

He screws the legs back into the table, but leaves the tabletop upside down on the floor. He ties the strip of cloth to a table leg as a white flag. He leaves three jars of peaches next to the flag, proof of his goodwill.

He is willing to offer the rats something in exchange for a little peace. He is willing to exchange something valuable for the right to collect keys. Even something of great value.

His father, for instance.

Limit.

Days pass. The jars of peaches remain. The rats do not come.

He tips the tabletop onto its side. He drags it over to block the bathroom door. The flag drags across the floor, turning gray. He unties the flag from the table leg, carries it to his mother, draping it across her calves.

There are keys to be collected. He has been told that he should collect keys. He will collect keys.

He is at the outer edge of the intersection, near the spool, holding a ring of keys. He follows the fishline back, trying the keys at each door, without avail.

*

He listens to his own footsteps. He stops abruptly. Behind him footsteps continue an instant, stop. Whirling around, he sees nothing.

He continues forward. Behind him, a light sputters out. He turns his head, peering backward into the fresh darkness. He feels the fishline vibrate. He starts to run.

He lumbers forward, crossing dusty intersections. He reaches the spool of fishline, stops long enough to heave it up and struggle on. The fishline plays out through his legs, shuttling to and fro across the spool. On one side of the spool appears a strip of exposed wood, growing wider as the fishline plays out. He crosses three dust-filled intersections and enters clean halls. He stoops to pick up a set of keys, hurries to the next intersection. He plucks up another set of keys and lumbers forward, the keys hooked awkwardly over two fingers. He stumbles, breathing hard, shifting the spool's weight to one side, to the hand without keys in time to scoop up a final set of keys.

The fishline pulls stiff between his legs, spool growing solid before his thigh, drawing him up short. The line breaks, he is thrown forward. Keys jingling, he tumbles down.

Brey has run out of fishline.

[THREE]

Brey, at Rest.

He lies splayed near the spool. He rolls his body over, stares up at the ceiling. He lifts a hand to his face, tracing a crack running from the upper edge of the mask down to his eye. He draws a deep breath.

Perhaps it would be best to pretend to be dead. Perhaps it would be best to deceive the rats. Perhaps it would be best to wait until the rats approach his body, thinking it a corpse, and then kill them.

He has memorized the rat books. He has begun to think like a rat.

He hears the sound of footsteps at some distance. He lifts his head, straining to see through a mask gone skew.

"You are lying in the middle of the hall, Brey."

Craning his neck, he glimpses the upper half of his father.

"Me?" says Brey.

"Is there anyone else?" says his father.

"You?" says Brey.

"Lying down, for God's sake," says his father. "Is there?"

Brey looks across the level of the floor. He turns his head to the other side, looks. He turns back to his father, shakes his head.

"Get up," says his father.

Brey does not move.

"Don't be difficult, Brey."

His father straddles him, reaching down to slide his palms under his back. Straining, he drags Brey to his feet.

Brey lets his knees turn to water, refusing to support his own weight.

Grunting and staggering, his father hugs him to his side with one arm. He strikes Brey in the throat with his other fist. He bares his teeth, bites Brey on the ear.

He lets go. He moves back his bloody mouth. Shaken, the boy stands.

The moment his father is out of sight, Brey lies down. He is not afraid of rats. He is protected by his boots, his keys, his mask.

The only thing he fears for are his eyes. The eyeholes of the mask are large enough to allow snouts. As he kills rats, he must remember to shield his eyes with one hand.

He lies in the hall, alone. The rats are clever. They have not come. They plan to starve him.

He turns his face to the floor. He pulls himself to the wall. Bracing his hands against the wall, he rises to his knees, sways to his feet.

His bones are sore. His tongue cleaves as if his mouth were packed with dust. The keys hang heavy upon him. He can feel his father's teeth still clinging to his ear.

He gathers the scattered keys, hanging them upon his hooks. Leaving the spool on the floor, he follows the fishline back.

*

If the rats are waiting in the darker hallways, he can do little to avoid them. It would be safer to take another route back, but he will not leave the fishline. Despite his father's misgivings, he must keep to the fishline.

The path turns away from the terminal wall. He follows the fishline as it runs straight, turns, turns, continues straight, turns again. The path is not as he remembers it. Yet there are no keys in the intersections of his path. He is following the right path.

He continues. He stops when he reaches a dust-filled intersection. The dust was not here before. Perhaps the dust has been moved here. By the rats, to torment him.

He moves through three intersections filled with dust. He travels through each, stepping lightly.

He looks to one side. He sees that the intersections to either side of his path are free of dust. A second glance, and he sees that there are no keys in those intersections.

Logic: If he has not explored the intersections, there would be keys. If he has, there would be fishline. If not one, the other. Yet there are neither.

"Father?" Brey cries, turning circles. "Father?"

On Blame.

He waits in the middle of the hall for his father to come. His father does not come.

His father has lied. His father chose to collect keys. Otherwise, there would be keys in all of the intersections which Brey has not explored. His father has betrayed him.

Yet, suppose it were not his father but the rats?

Rats are collectors, according to Our Friend the Rat. *If they discover a glittering object, they will bring it back to their nest.*

Keys do not glitter, but they catch light. The rats might take keys for two reasons: a) the keys catch light or b) to persecute Brey. Nothing must be blamed on his father. Everything can be blamed on the rats.

But should it? Perhaps his father and the rats are working together against him, his father's hatred of rats a cover-up for his father's hatred of his son.

Brey will return to his rooms. He will return to confront his father, to force him to reveal the truth. This time Brey will not be easily satisfied.

His Desk.

Turning a corner, he comes to the end of the fishline.

In the middle of an otherwise empty intersection stands his desk, all the drawers missing but one. One of the legs has been gnawed off, the stump of it lying near Brey, the fishline wound around it.

He winds the fishline around his hand, reeling the leg to him.

It must have taken a vast number of rats to carry his desk through the halls. The two rats that have escaped his father have multiplied.

He opens the remaining drawer. Within, a canteen and three jars of peach preserves. His papers are missing, perhaps destroyed. He closes the drawer.

Leaving the desk, he follows the fishline out. Ten intersections later, he reaches the new end of his fishline.

He lifts it, examines it. The end of the fishline is neither stretched nor curled nor deformed. It has been cleanly cut. He has lost his rooms.

His Wandering.

He attaches one end of the shortened fishline to the desk. To the other, he attaches the broken desk leg. He holds onto the leg as he explores the halls, reeling and unreeling the fishline as if the leg were a spool.

The fishline reaches to a distance of ten intersections. He maps a roughly diamond-shaped area, ten intersections in each cardinal direction, less for those intersections which he cannot approach directly. He does not find keys.

Using a key, he scratches a map onto the surface of the desk. He codes "O" for intersections without keys, "–" and "|" for hallways. If he finds intersections with keys, he will record them with an "X."

He explores in every direction. He reaches the limit of his fishline. Within his range are no keys to collect, no new hallways, no terminal walls, no windows. He sits on the floor near the desk, eating the last of his peaches. His fingers are stained yellow, his mask glazed below the mouth. The crack in the forehead of the mask has spread wider, exposing the cloth beneath.

He licks his fingers. He stands and sets out, exploring again the same halls.

He chooses a direction, follows the fishline to its end. His father stands one intersection farther, well out of his reach.

His father cups his hands around his mouth. "Brey!" his father calls.

Brey lifts the desk leg up, shows his father the fishline attached to it. His father, squinting, moves a few steps closer.

"Where is the spool?" says his father.

"Cut," Brey says. "Rats."

"Are you sure it was rats, Brey?"

"Not rats?" says Brey.

"Whoever cut it did you a favor. You must leave the fishline."

Brey shakes his head.

"Come here, Brey," says his father.

Brey does not move.

"Who gave you life, Brey?" says his father. "Is that where I went wrong?"

Brey takes a step backward. He turns, flees. His father remains motionless, watching him run.

He takes hold of the desk and pulls. The desk groans toward him, listing toward the corner missing the leg. Walking backward, he drags the desk after him.

He pulls the desk into the next intersection. Unreeling his fishline, he explores the additional hallways he can reach from there.

There are no keys in the new intersections. He returns to the desk, scratching his findings onto the surface. He pulls the desk forward an intersection, sets out.

*

The desktop is covered with scratches. He humps the desk forward. He travels to a new intersection, this one filled with dust.

He closes his eyes. He drops to his knees, poking his fingers forward. He finds no keys.

He drags the desk forward one intersection, sets out. Beyond the first dust-filled intersection is a second. He drops to his knees, wades in. He stands, coughing, his hands empty. He returns to the desk, carves his findings into it.

A third dust-filled intersection and the dust ends. The next intersection is as empty of keys as all the others. As is the next, the next, the next.

He searches for his rooms. The halls are not infinite—he once reached a terminal wall. Eventually he must find his rooms.

He has nothing to eat. He has not slept. He pulls the desk forward.

Some of the halls are dark, others lit. None have keys. He travels with great speed when there are no keys to collect. The desk is covered over with interlapped marks which tell him nothing. He does not know where to scratch his next mark. He finds the space with the least number of other marks and scratches his mark there.

He has explored an unknown number of intersections in an unknown amount of time. Had there been keys in these intersections, his back would now be broken. But there have been no keys.

He unties the fishline from the broken desk leg. He opens the desk drawer. Empty peach jars are stuck to the floor of the drawer by their syrup. He breaks the jars free, their bases shearing off, leaving jagged circles of glass.

He puts the broken desk leg into the desk. He ties the fishline around his waist, decreasing its range by a meter. To compensate, he moves the desk a meter closer to the edge of the intersection.

The intersections are similar. None have keys. None have dust. None lead to his hall. He moves the desk forward. He keeps on.

*

His Keys.

He stands in an intersection, leaning slightly forward. The fishline is taut behind him. He takes a set of keys from his arm. He drops it onto the floor. The keys clink when they hit. *Clink.*

Leaving the keys in the intersection, he walks backward toward the desk.

Once there, he turns around again, returns to the intersection.

On the floor he sees a set of keys, the first in a long while.

The keys have returned.

His father sits cross-legged in an intersection. Brey touches his ear, hugs the wall, nods in passing.

"Still collecting, Brey?" says his father, reaching out to touch Brey's arm.

"Collecting keys," Brey says. He removes a ring of keys from his hooks, shows it to his father.

"Shall we be friends again?" his father says.

Brey hesitates, nods.

His father stands, opens his arms, moves forward. Trapped against the wall, Brey must meet the embrace.

He travels the halls, dropping keys in intersections. There are keys to collect now in every intersection. His load gets no heavier.

He collects the keys one set at a time. He returns, trying each key in each door.

Advantages: Brey is satisfied. The weight on his back will never increase. His back will never break. He will collect keys until he starves.

Disadvantages: He has not slept. He has no food, he has no water. He will never find his rooms unless he stops re-collecting the keys. He is as good as dead.

He collects keys, checks the doors, marks the map. The surface of the desk is mutilated. He runs his hand over the desktop. His palm comes away shot through with splinters.

*

As he walks, the fishline becomes entangled about his knees. His steps grow shorter. The fishline slides, slips down, spools loosely about his ankles. He shuffles forward, tottering stiffly from side to side.

Ahead lies a set of keys. He moves forward.

The line tightens. His ankles come together. He tries to continue forward. He sways. He stretches his hands toward the keys and pitches forward.

[FOUR]

His Back.

His father never said, "Stay attached to the fishline." His father never said, "Someday you will run out of fishline." His father never said, "You must be careful – the fishline might become entangled around your feet."

There are many things his father never said.

What his father did say was, "Are you certain collecting keys is the right choice?" Brey is not certain.

He shakes his head. The shards of plaster still clinging to the cloth click together. He eases himself over to his back. He tries to move his legs apart, finds them bound together.

He lies on the ground, body still. He stares at the light bulb.

Slivers of plaster scatter the floor. He raises his broken face. His father's face leans into his own, warmly. His father tugs on the rags covering his face, tearing free a shard of plaster. He turns the shard in his hand, flicks it aside.

"What has happened to your face, Brey?" asks his father.

Brey turns his face away. He father reaches out, cups his son's chin in his palm. He forces his son's face to look at him.

"Stand up, Brey," his father says.

Brey does not stand. His father grabs the straps of his harness. His father heaves on the straps, raises him slightly off the floor. Brey stiffens his body. His father lets him fall.

Moving back a step, he kicks Brey in the temple. Brey grits his teeth.

His father stoops, inspects the side of Brey's head, caresses his temple. He rises, takes Brey by the boots, drags him down the hall. Brey bends his knees, kicks them swiftly into his father's stomach.

His father lets go, stumbles bent and staggering. He stands wide-legged above Brey, catching his breath.

"This is for your own good, Brey," says his father.

Grabbing his straps, he drags Brey down the hall. Brey digs his fingers and heels into the floor, shaking his shoulders until his father releases him.

"I have given you slack, Brey," says his father. "But too far is too far."

His father kneels. He removes a set of keys from Brey's hooks, casts it aside. He removes another, casts is aside. Another, another, another.

He continues to remove keys until Brey bites his hand. Cursing, his father rises, departs.

Comes a pressure on one side of his face. He does not move. A shape crosses his eye, rubbing against the eyelid. It moves to cover the other eye. Where it touches his face, it is warm, soft. Covered with hair.

Rat.

He struggles to move his legs. His legs are bound in fishline. They do not move. He tries to lift his head but the rat is too heavy. He twists his neck sideways. The rat claws at cloth and shard, sliding off his face.

The rat squats close to his face, cheeks asquirm. The tail is bare. The feet are grayish pink as are the eyes. The body is covered with matted grey hair. The head tapers to a blunted snout. Below the snout, the tips of two teeth.

The rat clambers up the bridge of Brey's nose, onto his temple. Brey moves his head slightly. The rat slides off in a heap. The rat sniffs his face, clambers atop his head. It sits upon his ear.

He slowly lifts his arm. He moves his hand up his body. He touches the rat's tail. He brushes his palm over the rat's body to touch the head.

He curls his fingers in a basket around the rat's head. He tightens

his fingers until the knuckles whiten. The rat sucks at his hand, breathless, scrabbling and clawing the side of his face. It entangles its claws in cloth and plaster. His fingers tighten.

He opens his hand. The rat slides off his face and onto the floor, quivering, its eyes floating and misdirected. He rolls onto his side, carefully knotting the rat's tail. He ties a double knot, leaving a slight loop. He forces the loop over a hook on his harness, hanging the rat as if a set of keys.

The rat lolls off to one side, its neck twisted, its head lying turned against the floor.

He stares at the light bulb until it is blotted out. His father stands above him, dark-faced, head surrounded by a fiery nimbus of hair. His father holds the rat's tail pinched between thumb and forefinger. He dangles the rat in the air.

"Your idea of a joke, Brey?"

"Joke?" croaks Brey.

"No joke?" says his father.

"Rat?" says Brey.

"Rat?" says his father, hooking the creature back onto Brey's chest. "Where?"

There is his father, lifting him, lifting him.

For His Own Good.

A bank of twelve lights in the ceiling, five of which have expired. He turns his head. He sees that he is lying on a mattress. Four walls, a single door. He has escaped the rats.

No doubt, the rats will find him. Yet, before they arrive, he will devise traps. He will bait the traps with peach preserves, using fishline to set them. He has thought of several good traps. There are more traps than the deadfall – traps that *How to Build a Better Mousetrap* does not cover, traps that the rats will not know to avoid.

The dead rat hangs from a hook on his chest, beneath the sheet that covers him. He will get out of bed. He will draw a picture of the rat. He will flush the rat down the toilet. He will find his fishline and knot the

pieces together, so as to continue to collect keys. He will not collect keys until the rats are dead, but he will collect keys.

The sheets cling tightly to him. They are tucked under his body. He rocks back and forth until the sheets loosen. He frees his hands.

He rolls over onto his side, looks over the edge of the bed to see on the floor below a mound of keys.

He feels his body. Except for the rat, the hooks are empty.

He rolls his legs out of the bed, brings his feet to the floor. He pushes his body upright, steps away from the bed. Without keys, his movements are awkward and extreme, his balance tenuous.

He rests one hand against the headboard for balance. Reaching down, he untangles a ring of keys from the pile and hangs it on his harness. He takes another ring, and another, and another, the heap beside him diminishing, his body growing hard under the weight.

He falls into bed. He pulls the sheet up to his neck. The door opens.

"How are you feeling, Brey?" says his father.

"Feeling?" says Brey.

His father shakes his head. His father comes to the edge of the bed. His father leans over him. He leans down into Brey's body. He presses his mouth to Brey's mouth.

Brey tastes the taste of his father taking away his breath.

His father is all powerful. His father is a myriad-minded man.

Brey will be lucky to survive.

The Art of Dying

K. J. BISHOP

MONA SKYE, the duellist and poet of lately tragic fame, lay where her friends had placed her, on brocade cushions in a corner of the smoking room beneath the Amber Tree café.

Illness, allowed to run rampant, had repaid the favour with curious gifts. Fever made her long, austere face beautiful. It reddened her lips and made her grey eyes sparkle like stones. As her lean body wasted towards frailty it had come to exhibit the strange liberal grace of a strong thing weakened and perversely unashamed of its new tenderness. Even her pale hair appeared softer and brighter then before.

The disease turns her into that old cliché, the beautiful and beloved thing that can live only a short while… Vali Jardine could taste her own anger as if it were in the mildly opiated smoke she inhaled through the pipe of the narghile that stood on the carpet between them.

Anger had been Vali's closest companion since the night, back in summer, of the Sending of Sins, when Mona had drunkenly sworn to let Death catch her at last. She would face the grinning bastard, she said; seduce him by being more ardent than he, so that when the end came she would take him, rather than the opposite. She had made this announcement to discomfited onlookers in the crowd gathered on the bank of the Leopold Canal at Jubilee Point to place paper lanterns in the water and watch them float away down the long dark stream, past the porches of the old slumbering floodlit mansions and the new sleepless factories. The next morning she rejected her medicines, throwing all her tonics and powders out onto the little courtyard below

the apartment she and Vali shared.

A male voice came out of the gloom on Mona's other side. "She's asleep." A black damask sleeve reached across the cushions and pale fingers lifted the pipe out of her hand. The man's features were visible as faint mouldings in the shadow under a curtain of long black hair. His name was Gwynn. A sometime adventurer from Falias in the snow-swept north of the world, he and Mona had once been comrades in arms and sweethearts down in the canyon country west of the Teleute Shelf. The love affair had been uncomplicated and brief and their friendship had endured. Parted by circumstances, separate routes had brought them to Sheol, where both had found a new metier playing the city's games of justice.

Gwynn drew on his own pipe and looked from his old inamorata to the woman who was now her lover.

"Why don't you take her somewhere cleaner? Out of the city."

"A suburban cure? Rock beats scissors, boredom beats tragedy?"

"Shouldn't the pastoral be expected to win a battle now and then?"

"In its war with the heroic? The famous restorative power of grass and goats might work, but not against the power of her audience here, I wouldn't think."

"Then don't bring her back to them."

"And where should I take her?"

"Anywhere away from the evil comforts of prison." Gwynn exhaled a stream of smoke and pushed his hair back from his face, revealing pale, greenish, heavily slitted eyes.

Vali snorted. "When will you be packing your bags and leaving, then?"

He laughed lazily. "I tried once, but I got homesick. My soul likes it here entirely too much. But that dear soul there is of a different quality. She was always a runner…"

She wanted him to be quiet. "You don't have the right to talk about souls. You only know about bodies, Gwynn."

She supposed that even more than his silence, she wanted a fight, which she wouldn't get.

He laughed again, as if he didn't mind the insult at all, and said,

"Well, this body is tired. And so are you, I daresay. I'll get us a cab." Raising himself, he took up his guns and sword from the floor and buckled them on, and took a further minute to impose order on his clothing, lastly pulling on a pair of black kid gloves that he stretched over his fingers with a slightly pedantic air.

Vali watched the back of his damask tailcoat recede into the haze of oily lamp-lit smoke. Almost all of Mona's friends had deserted her, fearing they would catch her illness. No doubt embarrassment had motivated some of them. She wondered whether it was love, loyalty, or something else that kept Gwynn hovering around.

And what about you, whom she rejects along with the rest of the world? Is this only the natural course of love – the turning away from the partner and towards solipsism, given a public airing? And should you wear the disgrace?

She addressed her reflection in the narghile's glass belly, as if it had some power which could explain her own soul to her. But the image, distorted by the curve of the glass, showed her no oracle, only a woman in mannish clothes: dark of face, not so young, not unhandsome. The old caste scars on her cheeks didn't show in the dim reflection. Her hair was rolled into the long, tight dreadlocks worn by the military clans of Oran, her homeland in the southeastern tropics. She had kept the style for aesthetic reasons and, also, because she had no wish to discard all of her former self.

It was a common saying that everyone in Sheol was a foreigner. *Smells on the wind,* Mona had called the city's population once, on a day when they sat people-watching in a briefly voguish bar on Arcade Bridge.

Vali found her boots and tugged them on. Her fingers were sluggish fastening buckles and laces. All she had got out of the night's indulgence was torpor without calm.

Over the troubled sound of Mona's breathing, Vali became aware of an irregular noise behind her; a quiet scratching that inspired a mental image of a mouse scuttling over a slate floor. She looked around and saw a reedy, fair-haired teenager perched on the edge of a divan, writing in a notebook. Vali would have taken him for one more poet hunting inspiration in pipe dreams if she had not seen him give her the furtive,

inquisitorial look of the gutter-begotten press. Well, she would see for herself the nonsense he was writing.

She rose, advanced, and, glaring, snatched the notebook out of his hand and skimmed the jottings therein. He had written:

> Society Report: Mona Skye, the renowned sabreuse, sonneteer and despiser of the world, observed unconscious in a drug den on the notorious Sycamore Street strip. The end appears to be nearing for the self-destructing heroine…

At the Cutting Edge: Mona Skye's worsening condition has cast a gloom over the demimonde and beyond. Conversations are not sparkling. Beaus and belles inhale sedatives and dress like undertakers. Expect the chic look this winter to be formal, functional and funereal.

Art Update: Is Mona Skye's slow suicide art? Many think so. Despite the resistance of the conservative establishment, public opinion seems to be with the progressive critics who have been claiming that death as performance is the ultimate art form, an art against which there can be no appeal. They may well be right. Watching Mona Skye, one apprehends a strangely exquisite unfurling of energies, an unravelling of reality and the expected. Killer and victim are one, coexisting in a symbiosis of extended intimacy in a performance as unique as an individual life, a condensation of life as a journey toward death that all must undergo, and a logical answer to illogical life.

It was only the usual drivel, but Vali couldn't help taking it personally. She felt the pressure of fury rising inside her like steam in a boiler. Her mind flung up an image of an autopsy where loafing *pretentieuses* clustered around Mona's body while quaffing aperitifs and gobbling hors d'oeuvres. She rubbed the pommel of the sword at her hip. But words were the only weapons permissible here, and unlike her lover she had little talent in their use.

She said frigidly, "It's in poor taste to serve up a person's suffering as entertainment for the chattering classes."

The boy gave a large twitch, but he attempted no evasion. He was

wearing a suit that needed some cleaning and a leather coat that was at least two sizes too big. His hair had the untidy appearance of down on a wet duckling.

"Ma'am," he said, "the last thing I want to do is offend. This city looks to your profession for inspiration in everything, including matters of taste."

Every day she walked past children playing "Chop-Chop" and "Kill 'Um All" on the pavements. Duellists were fêted in popular culture. Their images were made into character dolls and reproduced on household items and souvenirs. Wildly fictionalised, lurid stories about their adventures and private lives were printed for an eager public in cheap magazines with titles like *Corinthian, Hearts and Blades* and *Tales from the Theatre of Woe.* Girls dressed up as Mona, painting their faces white and drawing ornamental trickles of rouge down their lips.

This fame had once been Vali's as well. Like Mona and Gwynn, she had employed herself as a professional duellist in the juridical playhouses of the city. However, her beliefs concerning justice had caused her eventually to hang up her mask and withdraw from the milieu of the monomachia. These days she earned a plainer living as a bodyguard and fencing tutor.

Sometimes she saw dolls with her face on sale or collecting dust in secondhand shops. Merchandise featuring Mona's image, on the other hand, was currently riding a wave of popularity.

No one's guiltier of bad taste than she. She's making a shabby exhibition of herself, and I'm accepting a part in it, thought Vali.

"I have a duty to the people," the kid journalist said. "They must have information." He drew himself up, lifting his chin pugnaciously to look Vali in the eye. "The freedom of the press is sacred, ma'am."

Vali looked down at him. "Nothing is sacred," she said flatly. She gave him back the notebook, in which he immediately resumed writing. She had the impression that he was recording the incident which had just occurred.

"Can I quote that? 'Nothing is sacred?'"

She was sorry she had allowed herself to get angry at a magazine hack, of all insignificant people.

"Go ahead," she said wearily.

Gwynn returned then, emerging out of the smoke and shadows. "Our chariot awaits," he said. His gaze took in the pen-wielding youth and he raised a mildly inquiring eyebrow at Vali.

"Let's go," she muttered.

Vali carried Mona. She followed Gwynn up the stairs and out through the back door to the lane behind the café. The youth trailed, introducing himself to their backs. His name was Siegfried and he worked for *Verbal Nerve* magazine. Perhaps they read it, or had seen it somewhere?

The vehicle waiting in the lane was a rickety hooded chaise harnessed to a skin-and-bones nag whose ill condition was typical of Sheol's cab horses. Vali and Gwynn were too busy seating Mona comfortably inside to notice Siegfried positioning himself to get aboard. When he squeezed himself in next to Vali, she felt herself at a loss. Gwynn ignored him, evidently regarding him as her guest and her problem. Merely telling the kid to leave seemed a weak reaction to his bizarre effrontery, and if he refused to go, what could she do? To forcibly remove him would likely rebound in publicity of the least desirable kind. She could imagine the tabloid headlines – *Former Hero's Brawl Shame*. Vali resigned herself to accepting it as yet another strange and uncomfortable situation to be endured, and gathered up her dignity.

"Magnolia Terrace, river end," she ordered the driver of the chaise, a bent and leathery old woman wearing a battered tricorn and a voluminous cloak.

The beldam cracked her whip and the horse lurched off at a trot, taking them down a lane to the left and into the traffic and crowds that filled Sycamore Street from sidewalk to sidewalk despite it being the middle of a cold autumn night.

It was crowded on the seat under the canvas hood. Vali and Gwynn had twisted sideways to give Mona more room. Siegfried found himself poked by scabbards and gun butts wherever he tried to sit. He abandoned the seat and stood on the footboard, and from there began an impromptu interview. Mona being still unconscious, he questioned the other two.

How many people had they each killed? Did they enjoy their work? In their respective views, what was the duellist's role in society? What did they do in their spare time? How were their homes decorated? What did they think of Mona's dance with death? The youth fired questions and chased answers with relentless zeal, in seeming oblivion to the peril he would be in should one or both of his captive subjects lose patience. Or, if he did understand, he was stimulated by the danger.

Vali responded with monosyllables or morose silence. Gwynn gave their interrogator better satisfaction, responding with answers which, whether true or not, would make good copy. Siegfried filled pages with shorthand notes. Vali suspected Gwynn of slightly enjoying the attention. However, her mood was too grim and grieving to allow her to feel any amusement.

To Vali, their progress took on the confused, uncontrollable quality of a dream. She started feeling that she had slid sideways into an alternative, stupidly surreal existence which was crammed full of details that were irritating, strange and boring all at once. Crowds of late-night shoppers and partygoers surged under green and red silk lanterns hanging on wires across the streets, hurrying as if on missions of great and secret importance. The hag put the whip to the horse, which panted like a demon-beast in front of them, white breath steaming from its nostrils and bones moving like pistons under its skin. Mona's lovely head lolled, saliva pooling in the corners of her mouth.

They passed an open yard where a religious lynch-mob was holding an auto-da-fé. Several thousand faces, screaming in rapturous hysteria, were washed in orange light from the scaffold where a human shape was visible at the centre of a blaze. A procession of hooded penitents started across the road, each pair lashing the shoulders of the pair in front of them, forcing the through-traffic to stop while they passed. The old woman and half a dozen other drivers yelled imprecations, to no effect on the lashers, who kept to their shuffling ritual pace.

The noise woke Mona. Her eyes opened wide and she grabbed Vali's arm. "I'm dying!" she gasped. "I saw it! I saw Death. I've been dreaming. Don't take me to the house, Vali. Take me to the necropolis. I want to

die there, where it's quiet." She looked around deliriously. "Where am I? Vali, are you here too?"

Vali stroked Mona's hair, trying to soothe her. "Don't fret," she murmured. "We'll be home soon."

Mona clutched her hand. "No," she rasped fiercely, "I'm dying!" As if to make the point she started coughing. "I want to die in peace. Out in the air, under the stars. Take me there, Vali. Please."

"All right," Vali said. "All right, sweetheart." She stuck her head around the carriage hood. "Driver," she called out, "take us to the necropolis."

"Aye; it's pretty this time of year," the woman called back, and at the next intersection turned the chaise uphill. They clattered through the city, a long uncomfortable journey, with Mona falling into frequent bouts of coughing. In between these she lapsed into a semi-conscious state. Every now and again she would look around glassily and ask, like a child, "Are we nearly there yet?"

"Soon," Vali promised her over and over.

Siegfried wrote it all down in his notebook.

At last they came to the dry Geulah river. Nothing more than a trench filled with vegetation and rubbish, it marked the end of the city proper. It was spanned by an ancient metal bridge that was the only road to the necropolis, which covered the hills on the other side, its tombs and shrines rising from the former riverbank, a dark panorama of monumental stonework stretching to the right and the left as far as visibility reached. Sheol was old, and needed extensive space to accommodate its many generations of dead. Beyond the great cemetery there was only a no man's land of weeds and twisted bushes before the drop over the edge of the Teleute Shelf.

They clattered across the bridge to the end, where the beldam reined the horse in. Gwynn paid the fare while Vali gathered Mona in her arms and lifted her out.

Gwynn spoke to Siegfried, who had climbed out with them. "It might be better for you to go back," he said, "all things considered."

The boy turned up the collar of his coat against the cold, which was stiffer than in the city centre, and tugged on a pair of woollen gloves.

"Sir, I'm not afraid of the dead."

"The dead fear the living…those living who forget them and those who remember them too well… The dead fear truth and untruth, speech and silence…" It was Mona who spoke, startling everyone, her grey eyes shining queerly. But she wasn't looking at Siegfried, whose face nonetheless registered a pleased and justified expression.

"Take me to St. Anna Vermicula's tomb," she said. "And I can walk. I'm not a cripple."

She took shaky independent steps when Vali, at her insistence, set her down.

The saint was buried a good half-hour's walk over the hills. Mona, leaning on Vali's arm, set a slow pace for them all.

Many of the greater tombs and monuments were as large as the houses of the living. Elaborate enclosures several tiers high contained stone sarcophagi stacked in rows, of which some lay in helter-skelter collapse and many in the intermediate stages of decline. Stone stairs provided access for those who wished to pay their respects, or who were simply sightseeing. A group of tourists were clustered some distance away, visible by their bobbing lanterns.

The silence of the necropolis was a tangible presence in the air, as if it were not merely an absence of sound but a thing with its own substance. The huge graveyard was entirely without trees, and therefore there were few birds of the night to disturb the quiet. Soft, short-bladed grass grew on the paths, muffling footsteps. The air was cold and very still; the noise of the city was remote. The night sky was marvellously clear, with a three-quarter moon and many bright stars that Vali fancied looked like white candles burning in reproachful memory for all the drowned hours in a person's life.

Mona seemed withdrawn in a world of her own. Gwynn, making a virtue out of a dubious discipline, kept to a place off to the side, where he was as unobtrusive as a veteran butler, and even Siegfried seemed, for the moment at least, to have run out of things both to ask and to write. To her wonder, Vali felt the first touch of an unfurling peace.

St. Anna Vermicula's tomb was a colonnaded mausoleum housing a black marble effigy of the warrior martyr, on the farthest hillside in the

oldest section of the necropolis. The edge of the precipice was only a few hundred feet away across the untended land which began where the graves ended at the bottom of the hill. It was a sudden curtailing of the earth, with space and stars beyond.

Vali sat on the weathered steps of the tomb, her arm around Mona. Gwynn had walked a short distance away to smoke. She couldn't see Siegfried. It was possible to imagine that she and Mona were alone in the landscape of marble and weeds.

She fell gradually into a sense of timelessness, of being as still and untroubled as the tombs themselves, as if Time were a woman and she a babe on Time's back, and Time had put her down. She felt the mysterious life, the sense of familiarity with the stars.

Yet does it need us, any more than the seas of the world need ships? Vali wondered this, and answered herself, It never needed us or desired us until it made us, and then we, who are its organ of mind, desired it, and so love was formed and flung…

Mona stirred, bringing Vali back from her reverie. The sick woman was whispering something. Feeling strangely calm and adrift still – had the stars moved? – Vali bent her head down to listen. Turning around, she called out to Gwynn. He looked up from where he sat cross-legged on a sarcophagus on the ground.

"Mona wants to go down to the edge. I'm taking her. She wants you to come too."

Gwynn ground his cigarette out on the pitted stone, adding the butt to the several already there. He swung down and looked across the ragged land towards the cliff. "Fine with me," he said.

A wind always blustered across the barren margin between the tombs and the drop. That night it was a cold current that seemed to blow straight down off the stars themselves. But the no man's land was, in its own way, a beautiful place. The lonely stunted trees possessed a various, sinewy and surprising kind of grace in their wind-sculpted asymmetries and irregularities. Wildflowers grew among the untidy grasses, and these had the charm of things never cared for or interfered with by anyone. Birds came and went here too: wild geese, finches, nightjars,

shrikes who had found ideal nests in the thornbushes onto which they affixed the rodents and smaller birds that were their prey.

Vali with Mona on her arm, and the separate figure of Gwynn, made their way across the delicate and brute ground, their hair and coats whipping in the wind. Siegfried followed several paces behind them, writing again in his notebook. More than once he tripped over rocks and pieces of fallen masonry he had failed to see, but he hardly noticed his barked shins and stubbed toes. His hands were trembling with excitement. He wasn't going to give this article to *Verbal Nerve*. Better publications would want it. He basked for a moment in the vision of a career reporting on the lives of the rich and dangerous, as one who had been admitted into their world. Realising he was running out of paper, he wrote as minutely as he could.

When they were about fifty yards from the edge, Mona insisted that she could walk unaided.

Crossing wasteland, Siegfried jotted. Miss Skye a fragile pilgrim or refugee, Miss Jardine gallant. At the edge – long way down.

It was indeed a long way. The escarpment dropped over a kilometre – but it might have been a hundred, for there was nothing to give a sense of scale – down to a dead ocean of sand that was dark bluish indigo in the moonlight, on which lay the faintly silver, irregular maculae of salt deposits. Here and there the sand surrounded weathered buttes and chimneys of rock. On the horizon the curve of the planet was clearly visible, an edge beyond the one on which they stood.

Siegfried stood next to Gwynn, close enough that he could smell the man's floral aftershave. He drew himself up and squared his shoulders. He was beginning to feel part of the team now, a companion to heroes. He narrowed his eyes and sucked in his cheeks a little, trying to copy Gwynn's pensive scowl.

"They say there are more bones under those sands than in all of the necropolis," Mona related hazily.

Vali tried to remember when Mona had talked about things other than death.

Mona started to say something else, but abruptly broke off coughing. A thimbleful of blood escaped her lips and fell, beginning a long fall

to the dry world below. More drops followed.

Vali was grateful when Gwynn drew Siegfried away. She lowered Mona to the ground and tried to shield her from the wind. "Such a mess we've made," she muttered, as she took the handkerchief out of Mona's coat pocket and put it in her hand. "A damn fine mess." She was unsure why she included herself in the accusation, except that to separate herself from Mona, now, would be a pain too far. But still she felt calm, and wondered if she was developing apathy as an instinctive stratagem for survival, withdrawing from all care like a threatened snail retreating into its shell.

Gwynn led Siegfried to a spot where a flat slab of stone lay in the weeds a short distance from the cliff, far enough away to give the women privacy without being out of earshot. Gwynn sat down on the stone, flicking back his coat-tails, and gestured for Siegfried to sit as well. Siegfried complied with a certain weakness of knee. Following celebrities was one thing; having a famous person actually invite his company was something else entirely. He had never had the experience before, and found it a little intoxicating. He was expecting Gwynn to speak, but the man's attention was fixed on a nearby thornbush, a shrike's abandoned scaffold where numerous tiny skeletons still hung. A spider as white as the bones themselves was busy among them, spinning, moving with opulent flourishes of its limbs.

"Look at that," Gwynn said softly. "How precisely that spider moves, how delicate she is. A natural mathematician, knowing innately the geometry she needs for her work. Do you ever take time to contemplate the wonders of nature, Siegfried?"

Siegfried shook his head. "Not really, sir." He was surprised by the question.

"You should. Nature can be very inspiring. I've always found it so."

Siegfried put pen to the last page in his notebook. "I guess I'm too much of a city boy, sir. I mean, I'd miss trees and things if they weren't there, but this place is pretty bleak. There's not much out here."

"Not for a man about town, I suppose. You must know a lot of people."

"Yes, sir. A journalist needs contacts."

"A network of informants? What an admirable approach to human relations. By the way, there's no need to call me 'sir.' I'm not a gentleman, despite what you may have read in the serials."

"Manners are a defence against the world, aren't they?" Siegfried shifted his seat. "I don't read those magazines," he said, self-consciously. "I prefer the stimulations of adroit thought to those of sensationalism."

"Is that so?" said Gwynn. "Well, each to his own stimulations. Personally, I've always favoured drugs." He reached inside the breast of his coat and took out a slender, fancy case. Opening it, he offered the long, red-papered, expensive-looking cigarettes inside to Siegfried before taking one for himself. Siegfried attempted to hide his pleasure as he accepted the proffered luxury. Usually he was the one who had to buy smokes and drinks for his interviewees. Gwynn lit for them both, the yellow flame of the match doing a brief dance in the dark.

The tobacco was smooth and richly aromatic. Siegfried inhaled with abandon. By the rush it gave him, he was certain there was some kind of extra dope in it as well. He jotted a note that Gwynn was indeed a gentleman, whatever his own claim.

Siegfried stared at the tranquil stars and listened to the rowdy wind, putting to paper various thoughts that came to him, until Gwynn said, "So what is it that you fear from the world?"

Siegfried paused in his writing. "In general? Or right now?"

"Let's start with now."

"I'm not really afraid," he said, "just excited, I guess. You know, butterflies inside? Well, maybe you don't know the feeling. Anyway, you're famous, and I'm not anybody yet. Like you said, I know a lot of people, but most of them aren't very important. Interviews are one thing," he said, dismissively waving his hand, "but we've gone beyond that, haven't we? I suppose I'm starstruck."

"Starstruck?" Gwynn smiled. "Answer me another question, Siegfried. What do you think it is about people like us – Miss Skye, our profession in general, even my unworthy self – that so fascinates the good citizens of this town? That they will take an interest in what you write

tonight, I have no doubt; but out of what matrix of habit, hope, imagination, appetite?"

Siegfried had been recording his own thoughts on exactly that matter, here and there among his other notes. He answered eagerly. "There are lots of reasons. You're artists. You're heroes. You're not chained by ordinary fears. You have freedom and power most people only dream of. Some people think you're angels, sent to wipe away the faulty so that the upright can survive."

"Ah. A generation whose teeth are like swords and whose fangs are like knives, to devour the wretched from off the earth and the weak from among the people."

"It seems you also have a poet's disposition."

"Those aren't my words. That was something I once heard a man of religion say. You like it, eh?"

"Very much. I've always liked predators better than prey."

"Is that a fact? Again, *de gustibus…"* Gwynn blew a smoke ring, which the wind ruined in an instant, while Siegfried continued vivaciously.

"All you swordslingers and knife-fighters and all – you've got the power of life and death. That's a pretty fascinating power. I guess I'd like to be able to put holes through people, too, sometimes. I've always admired you folks."

"Well, thank you, that's very nice. But tell me, do you take the orthodox view that we're enactors of divine justice – instruments of a moral universe?"

There was a change in the man's voice, an undercurrent appearing which Siegfried heard but could not precisely name, so that he hesitated again, crossing out what he had started to write. He said, "I'm not really sure."

Gwynn crushed his cigarette out and stood up. He looked around the base of the stone, where a few gentians and wild white poppies were growing. He broke off the head of a poppy and carefully tucked it into his buttonhole. He gave Siegfried a foxy look.

"Choose a number between one and five."

"A number?" Siegfried was nonplussed. The man hardly seemed

the type to play parlour games. He shrugged. "All right. Four. But I don't –"

Gwynn drew one of his twin revolvers. He emptied two rounds out of the chamber, leaving four in. After appearing to give it a moment's second thought, he removed a third and a fourth round. He spun the chamber and snapped it shut.

"Stand over there," he said, pointing the muzzle of the gun at the open ground past the thornbush.

Siegfried swallowed hard. Was this some kind of ceremony, an initiation ritual – a test of his courage and trust? Perhaps he had to survive this in order to be admitted to certain secrets. He had heard of such things happening.

Gwynn aimed the gun to point at Siegfried's face. "Move," he said.

Siegfried's heart vibrated as if someone had struck a gong inside his chest. Slowly, he put the notebook away in his pocket. There was nowhere he could run to, except over the cliff. He had no doubt that Gwynn's other gun was fully loaded. He had no idea of what else to do, so he got up from the stone, shakily, and stood a little behind the bush.

The gun muzzle waved. "Further back."

Siegfried walked haltingly backwards toward the cliff. He felt sick and weak-gutted, and wished he'd relieved himself back at the café, which now seemed to belong to another world.

"Further… Further… Stop!"

Siegfried couldn't see the end of the ground, but he knew it must be close behind him. *Have I been a fool?* he wondered. Gwynn was taking aim. The gunman's hair lifted suddenly in the wind, floating up to form a black halo radiating around his starkly moonlit face.

The shot was very loud.

Blood and matter erupted from the back of Siegfried's head, and his body fell backward into the empty sky.

Gwynn stalked to the verge of the cliff and looked down. He caught a vertiginous glimpse of the dead kid, a barely visible speck that soon diminished out of sight. He reloaded his gun and holstered it with a philosophical shrug.

Gwynn did not hold the orthodox view of his profession. For a moment he allowed himself to imagine that he had been an instrument of humour, sans the appellation of divinity. He mused, not for the first time, that if the putative divine claimed all territories of sense and significance for itself, it fell to comedy, with its bifurcations, reversals and annulments of sense, to destroy that claim. The existence of the comic viewpoint, even if it was only an interpretation placed upon the tragedy of a world where death was king of kings, might prove the absence of an absolute divine authority.

Mona did not die, and seemed embarrassed. She started taking her medicines again, claiming publicly to have grown bored with Death as a lover, but admitting privately to Vali that she felt a fresh enthusiasm for life.

"What made you change your mind?" Vali asked one morning. The slow pale arrows of the sun were passing through a vase of glass flowers on the windowsill, throwing faint coloured shadows onto their bed.

Equally colourful was the latest issue of *Hearts and Blades,* through which Vali was idly flicking. It featured the first installment of a serial in which Mona journeyed to the underworld to find a friend who was trapped there. The blurb for the next episode promised that "classic character" Vali Jardine would return. It was funny, Vali thought, to know that although one day you would die, your small-press avatars, your dolls and knick-knacks, would live on. You who had ceased to breathe and were extinguished would go on existing strangely, inflated by the sentience of readers and collectors, who would re-imagine you, re-create you, perhaps with less class and cleverness and fewer of your original qualities than you might have hoped for, but still, perhaps, with more energy, delight and imagination than you, when you lived, had put into the making of yourself.

Mona stretched her back and legs, luxuriating in the feeling of the mild sun and the linen sheets on her skin. Her malady was slowly but steadily going into remission. Her adventure in illness had been worth it, almost, for the pleasures of convalescence that were now hers – those

delicate, slightly abject pleasures of the reawakened senses. Milky tea and chicken soup, innocent aromas of bread and soap, the daily sounds of the street below fed like streams into the river of the sensual enjoyment she took in her recovery.

She hesitated over an answer. In fact, her recollection was hazy. She rather thought she had looked out into the night beyond the end of the Teleute Shelf and had feared it. Had refused its call—had failed it, refusing in the end to go the final dance with the milkthistle ghost whose queer, scornful lullabies had burned her on the mouth in the cradle and made her a poet. And then, too, there was that kid, dying as if the hour had wanted a life and had taken the first one offered.

"I always was stubborn. I never took the right path."

"Gwynn said you were a runner."

Mona snorted. She smoothed the bedspread over her legs. "I don't know. Fashions change. I suppose I lost my nerve. Then again, sometimes the witless leaf keeps drifting, until it sees love coming to pick it up."

Vali smiled, entirely unfooled, and rang for their boy to bring breakfast.

On a clear day early in winter the two women took a picnic lunch to the necropolis. They sat inside the shrine of St. Anna Vermicula. Mona had been taking her various physicks like a model patient. She was less pale, and had begun training with her sword again.

"I'm feeling much better," she declared, chewing delicately on a sandwich. "Wanting to die was some strange summer madness that lingered on out of season, I think."

"Perhaps it was," Vali agreed vaguely.

She could not recapture the sense of timelessness she had felt here a month ago. The world was marching on. Coming out to the necropolis they had gone past numerous building sites. Tall brick apartment blocks were going up along the canal. Chic new bars attracted the incrowd on Arcade Bridge.

Both women were in furs. Already there was a bite to the winter chill.

Although snow rarely fell on Sheol, Vali felt this year might prove an exception.

Munching on a biscuit, she watched the tiny figures of a tour group standing near the edge, peering down at the desert. Closer, in the middle of the no man's land, a group of children were playing "Masked Avengers." Their high voices carried on the wind:

The men in the masks,
The ladies in the masks,
See how they kill, see how they kill—
Six-shooters and switchblades,
Swords, daggers and poison,
We all fall down,
We all fall down.

At Reparata

JEFFREY FORD

EVERYONE REMEMBERS WHERE THEY WERE when they first heard that Queen Josette had died. I was standing in twilight on that cliff known as the Cold Shoulder, fly-fishing for bats. Beneath me, the lights of the palace shone with a soft glow that dissolved decrepitude into beauty, and a breeze was blowing in from the south, carrying with it the remnants of a storm at sea. I had just caught a glimpse of a star, streaking down behind the distant mountains, when there was a tug at my line followed hard by a cry that came, like the shout of the earth, up from the palace. I heard it first in my chest. Words would have failed to convince me of the fact, but that desperate scream told me plainly she was dead.

Josette had been an orphan left at the palace gates by a troupe of wandering actors. She arrived at a point in her life between childhood and maturity, wondrously lithe and athletic with green eyes and her dark hair cut like a boy's. I suspect she had been abandoned in hopes that her beauty and intelligence might work to make her a better life than one found on the road. This was back in the days when Ingess had just begun to build his new court from society's castaways. Upon seeing her, he pronounced she was to be the Lady of the Mirrors, but we all knew that she would someday lose the title to that of Queen. The drama that brought her to this stately affair was ever the court's favorite spectacle and topic of conversation.

Her hair grew long and entangled us all in her charm and innocence. Ingess married her on a cool day in late summer five years after her

arrival, and the Overseer of Situations released a thousand butterflies upon the signal of their kiss. We all loved her as a daughter, and the younger ones among us as a mother. She never put on airs or forced the power of her elevated position, understanding better than anyone the equanimity that was the soul of the Palace Reparata. Her kindness was the perfect match for Ingess's comic generosity.

With her passing, His Royal, as he had insisted on being called, came apart like light in a prism. I sat four nights in succession with him in the gardens, smoking my pipe and listening to him weep into sunrise. The quantity of tears drained him of his good looks and left him a haggard wreck, like some old crone, albeit with shining, blonde hair.

"See here, Ingess," I told him but could go no further, the logic of his grief too persuasive.

He'd wave his hand at me and turn his face away.

And so the world he had managed to create with his pirate ancestor's gold, his kingdom, suddenly lost its meaning. Before Josette had succumbed to the poison of a spider bite, Reparata was a place where a wandering beggar might be taken in at any time and made a Court Accountant or Thursday's High Astronomer. Every member of the palace had a title bestowed upon them by His Royal. There was no want at Reparata, and this made it an oasis amidst the sea of disappointment and cruelty that we, each in his or her own way, had found the world to be.

Never before had a royal retinue been comprised of so many lowly worms. The Countess Frouch had been a prostitute known as Yams in the nearby seaside town of Gile. His Royal welcomed her warmly, without judgment, as he did Tendon Durst, a round, bespectacled lunatic who believed beyond a doubt that he was joined at a shared eye with a phantom twin. In a single day's errant wandering, Durst had set out as a confirmed madman and ended the evening at the palace with a room of his own and a title of Philosopher General. We had never before seen someone speak simultaneously from both sides of the mouth, but that night he walked in his sleep and told us twice at once that he would never leave Reparata. We all shared his sentiment.

Even Ringlat the highwayman, hiding from the law, performed his

role of Bishop to the Crown righteously. Our lives were transformed by a position in society and whatever bizarre duties His Royal might dream up at his first encounter with us, standing before him at the palace gates, begging for a heel of bread or the eyes from that morning's marsupial dish. Times were bad everywhere, but Ingess was so wealthy, and Reparata was so far removed from the rest of the world, no one who wandered there and had the courage to ask for something was sent away. We lived long bright days as in a book and then, with a fit of narcolepsy, the reader closed his eyes and fell asleep.

If we ever had intentions of fleecing His Royal, the time of his mourning was the perfect opportunity. Instead, we went about our jobs and titles with even greater dedication, taking turns keeping an eye on our melancholic leader. My full title was High and Mighty of Next Week. Ingess, beneath his eccentric sense of humor, must have known that it was the only position vague enough to tame my impulses. On my own, I, who had never done an honest day's work in my life, created and performed a series of ritual tasks that gave definition to my importance at court. Gathering bats in order to exterminate the garden's mosquitos was only one of them. Another was dusting the items in the palace attic.

On Mondays I would usually spend the mornings making proclamations, and on the Monday following the death of Josette, I proclaimed that we should seek some medical help for His Royal. He had begun to see his young wife's spirit floating everywhere and was trying to do himself in with strong drink, insomnia, and grief.

"I see her next to the Fountain of the Dolphins as we speak, Flam," he said to me one night in the gardens.

I looked over at the fountain and saw nothing, but, still, the frantic aspect of his gaze sent a shiver through me.

It turned out to be the first proclamation of mine that was ever acted upon. I got high and mighty on the subject and didn't wait until the following week. Carrier pigeons were sent out to all the surrounding kingdoms inquiring if there was anyone who could cure the melancholy of loss. A small fortune in gold was offered as the reward. I changed my own title to Conscience of the King and set about to do all in my

power to cure Ingess, if not for his own good, then for the good of the state.

While we waited for a reply, His Royal raved and stared, only stopping occasionally to caress the empty air. His mourning reached such a state of hysteria that it made me wonder if it was natural. I had the Regal Ascendiary, Chin Mokes, a five-time convicted forger, take over the task of signing the royal notes of purchase in order to keep the palace running smoothly. A plan was hatched in which one of the women, well-powdered and bewigged, would dress up like Josette and, standing in the shadows of the gardens, tell Ingess to stop grieving. After the Countess Frouch laughed at us in that tone that could wither a forest, though, we saw the emptiness of our scheme.

Two harrowing months of sodden depression slithered by at a snail's pace before word finally came that a man from a distant land, a traveling practitioner of medicine, had recently arrived by ship in Gile. Frouch and I went in search of him, traveling through the night in the royal carriage, driven by none other than Tendon Durst. Though I was wary of the philosopher's sense of direction, his invisible brother was usually trustworthy. We arrived at daybreak by the sea and witnessed the gulls swarming as the fishing boats set out. "Do you think it is a good idea that you came back?" I asked her as we left the carriage.

"It's a test," she said, as she adjusted the position of her tiara atop her spiraling platitudes of hair and stamped out her cigarette. Heels were not the best footwear for the planks and cobblestones of Gile, but she wore them anyway. I thought the mink stole a little much, but who was I to say? To look the Conscience of the King, I wore one of his finer suits, a silk affair with winged collar and matching cape. In addition, I borrowed a large signet ring encrusted with diamonds. We left the Philosopher General in deep meditation and went forth as royalty, past the heap of fish skeletons, toward the boardwalk that led to the tavern.

The tavern keeper had known the countess in her earlier life and was pleased to see her doing so well. We asked if he had beheld the foreign healer and he told us he had.

"A short fellow," he said, "with a long beard. All he wears is a robe and a pair of boots." The tavern keeper laughed. "He comes in every day

a little after sunrise and has me make him a drink he taught me called Princess Jang's Tears. It ends with a cloud of froth at the top and a constant green rain falling in a clear sky of gin toward the bottom of the glass. I'd say he knows a thing or two."

I ordered two of them for us, using gold coin as payment. The tavern keeper was ecstatic. We sat by the large front window that looked out across harbor and bay. Neither of us spoke. I was contemplating my transformation over the past years from unwanted vagrant to the executor of a kingdom, and I am sure by the look in Frouch's eyes, she was thinking something similar. The strange drink was bittersweet, cool citrus beneath a cloud of sorrow. Then the doorbell rang and our healer entered.

The tavern keeper introduced us, and the healer bowed so low as to show us his star-shaped bald spot. He told us his name was unimportant but that his reputation was legendary even on the remote Island of the Barking Children.

"You are far flung," the countess said to him, "but can you cure loss?"

"I can cure anything, Countess," was his reply.

"Death?" I asked.

"Death is not a disease," he said.

He agreed to accompany us back to the palace if we would have a drink with him. The tavern keeper created a round of Princess Jang's Tears on the house, and we sat again at the table near the window.

"I feel you have a strong connection to this place, Countess," said the healer.

"You're as sharp as a stick of butter," she said, and lit a cigarette.

"Do you regret your days here?" he asked her.

"If I did, I would have to regret life," she said, turning her face to the window. Princess Jang's Tears were not the only ones to fall that morning.

The healer nodded and took his drink in a way that showed me he might have a regret or two himself. My hope was that these disappointments did not stem from the health of his patients.

We rode back to the palace in perfect silence. The healer sat next

to Frouch, and I across from them. As the carriage bounced over the poorly maintained road from Gile, I studied the man we had hired. His face, though half-hidden by a gray beard, showed its age yet still shone with a placid vitality. I knew he was smiling, though his lips did not move. On the palms of each of his hands were tattoos of coiled snakes. The robe he wore did not appear to be some form of foreign dress but in all reality a cheap, flannel bathrobe that might be worn by a fisherman's wife. Around his neck hung an amulet on a piece of string—an outlandish fake ruby orbited by glass diamonds set in a star of tin-painted gold. His small burlap sack of belongings squirmed at my feet.

"The young man's grief will consume him if I don't take drastic measures," the healer said to me after he had spent a day studying His Royal. We sat in the dining hall at the western end of that table which was so long and large, we at court called it the island. It was late and most of the palace was asleep. I sipped at coffee and the healer crunched viciously away at a bowl of locust in wild honey that the palace chef, the Exalted Culinarity, Grenis Saint-Geedon, once a famous assassin, had been so kind as to leave his bed to prepare.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Do you see what I am doing with this bowl of holy sustenance?" said the healer, a locust leg sticking out of the right corner of his mouth. "It will eat out his soul."

"Will he die?" I asked.

"That's not the worst part of it," said the old man.

"What are these drastic measures?"

"Let me just say, once I have begun, you will wish you hadn't requested I do so," he said.

"Can you cure him?" I asked.

"That," he said, lifting the bowl to lick it, "is a certainty that has roots in the very first instant of creation."

Either this man was an idiot or so great a physician that his method and bearing were informed by some highly advanced foreign culture. His dress and the manner in which he ate did not suggest the latter, but my most recent glimpse of Ingess trudging like a somnambulist along

the great hall was enough to convince me that the healer's diagnosis was correct. His Royal had shriveled miserably and was totally despondent. Even that blonde hair was now disintegrating into salt and floating away in his lethargic wake.

I feared the countess would lash me with her laughter when she heard of my decision, but I told the healer right then, as he set his bowl back on the table, "Do what you must."

Then the old man's lips moved into a wide grin to reveal a shattered set of teeth. He lifted the amulet from his chest and kissed the audacious ruby at its center. "You'll live to regret this," he told me.

"I already have," I said.

The next morning I had to address the assembled royalty of the court of Reparata on the subject of Ingess and his treatment. We met in the palace theater, all fifty-two of us. I took the stage, again dressed in the fine clothes of His Royal as a way of adding authority to my words. Miraculously, Frouch spared me as I apprised them of my decision, but the others were very skeptical. How could they not be – they had seen and met the healer.

"He's a fake," Chin Mokes cried out, and this got the others going because who better to know a forgery than the Regal Ascendiary?

"Eats insects," said the Exalted Culinarity, spitting as the stories told he had once done on the foreheads of each of his victims.

The Chancellor of Waste went right for the jugular. "He's no physician, he's Grandfather Mess. He couldn't cure a pain in the ass unless he left the room."

"He is legendary even on the remote Island of the Barking Children," I told them.

"Probably for keeping the sidewalks clean," someone shouted.

All of the jewelry of the assembled members of the court dazzled my eyes, and my head began to swim. Perspiration formed along my brow, and for the first time since coming to Reparata, I had that feeling of abandonment which had haunted my wandering for so many years.

Then the countess stood up and the others instantly quieted down. "You've all had a chance to pass wind. Now its time to get on with the necessity of saving His Royal. Unless one of you has a better plan, we

will all follow the healer's advice and see his treatment through."

The Chancellor of Waste opened his mouth wide to speak, but Frouch, without even turning to look at him said, "If you don't want me to laugh at you, you'd better reserve that part of your title that is about to issue from your tongue."

The Chancellor relented and sunk down in his seat as if to duck a derisive giggle.

Before sunrise the next morning, the treatment was begun.

His Royal lay completely naked on a bare table in the palace infirmary, rocking slightly from side to side and muttering all manner of weirdness. Frouch and I were present to represent the court during the medical procedure. Beside the healer, the young lad, Pester, Prince of the Horse Stalls, was in attendance, sitting on a stool in the corner, ever ready to do the physician's bidding. We also called for Durst, the Philosopher General, to see if he could decipher what might be Ingess's last message to us. It was a generally held belief in those days that one madman could easily interpret the ravings of another. The healer was anxious to begin, but we forestalled him, explaining how important a message from Ingess might be to his loyal subjects.

Durst came in dragging the invisible weight of his twin, and performing the impossible feat of discussing two different subjects simultaneously from either side of his mouth.

"My dear Philosopher," said the countess. "You give sanity a bad name."

He bowed as far as his stomach would allow, and then stood and listened with something verging on attention to our request. It was heartwarming to see how proud he was to have been of some use in the crisis. He strode with an official bearing over to the table where Ingess lay and leaned down to listen to the feverish stream of words.

While the Philosopher General was performing his duties, Frouch poked me in the side with her elbow and we both had difficulty holding back our laughter at the sight of him. The healer, witnessing the whole thing, merely shook his head and sighed impatiently.

When Durst finally turned around, we asked him what Ingess was saying.

He looked puzzled and told us, "It all sounds like gibberish to me."

The countess and I broke out laughing.

"But," he continued, holding up his right index finger, "my brother says that His Royal is concerned with a stream running under a bridge."

"Fascinating," said the healer as he ushered Durst out of the infirmary.

Upon his return, the old man lifted his burlap sack onto the table next to Ingess's head. From within it, he retrieved a pair of spectacles whose lenses were long black cylinders capped with metal. He fit the arms of these over His Royal's ears and adjusted the tunnels so that they completely covered the eyes. The moment this strange contraption was in place, Ingess let loose a massive sigh and went completely limp.

"What's this?" I asked.

The healer undid his bathrobe tie, wrapped the flaps around him more completely and retied it securely. "At the ends of those two tunnels there is a picture that appears, because of the way our sight overlaps, to have a third dimension. It is so endlessly fascinating to behold that the viewer thinks of nothing else. Time, pain, regret are pushed out of the mind by the intricate beauty of the scene."

"What does it show?" asked Frouch.

"I can't explain," said the healer, "it is too complex."

"Why is it necessary?" I asked.

"Because," said the healer, "what I am about to do to your liege would otherwise be so painful that his screams would threaten the sanity of everyone within the confines of the palace." With this, he reached into that bag of his and pulled forth a wriggling green creature the size of a man's index finger.

The countess and I stepped closer to see exactly what he was holding. The creature was a segmented, jade green, centipede-like thing with a lavender head and tiny black horns.

"Sirimon," he said with a foreign inflection in his voice.

"It looks like a caterpillar," said Frouch.

"Yes, it does," said the old man, "but make no mistake, this is Sirimon."

"His Royal's not going to eat that is he?" I asked, swallowing hard the memory of the healer's midnight snack.

"Perish the thought," the healer said, and with great care he brought his hand down to Ingess's left ear. He gave a high, piercing whistle, and the diminutive creature marched forward across his palm and into the opening in His Royal's head.

Frouch laughed at the sight of it in an attempt to control her horror. I turned away feeling as though I would be sick.

"Now we wait," I heard the healer say. He pulled up a chair and sat down.

Somewhere into our fourth hour of silent waiting, the old man jotted down the ingredients to Princess Jang's Tears and gave it to Pester.

"Tell the barkeep not to forget the bitters," he said.

The boy nodded, and before he could leave the room, I called out, "Make that two."

"Just tell him to keep them coming," called Frouch.

Pester returned, carrying a tray with three glasses and the largest pitcher in the palace, which contained a veritable monsoon of liquid sorrow. Frouch lit a cigarette and the healer poured. We made small talk, and, in the course of our conversation, the healer regaled us with a tale of his most recent patient, a man who, through the obsessive reading of religious texts, had become so simple and crude that he had begun to revert back into the form of an ape.

"His wife had to coax him down from the trees each evening with a trail of bananas."

"Did you change his reading habits?" asked the countess.

"No, I shaved his body and then prescribed three moderate taps on the head with a mallet at breakfast, lunch and dinner."

I was about to ask if the poor fellow had come around, but before I could speak, I noticed an irritating, disconcerting little sound that momentarily confused me.

"What is that?" I asked, standing unsteadily.

"Yes, I hear it," said Frouch. "Like the constant crumpling of paper."

"That is Sirimon," said the healer.

I walked over to Ingess and listened. The diminutive noise seemed to be coming from inside his head. Leaning over, I put my ear to his ear. It was with dread that I realized the sound was identical, though quieter being muffled by flesh and skull, to that of the healer working away at his bowl of locust.

"What's the meaning of this?" I yelled.

The old man smiled. "Sirimon is rearranging, creating new pathways, digesting the melancholy."

I had fallen asleep and was wrapped in a nightmare memory of childhood when a hand came out of the shadows and smacked me on the back of the head. Coming to, I rubbed my eyes, and standing before me was the healer holding forth his infernal green worm, now bloated and writhing in its obesity.

"Sirimon has finished," he said.

Frouch was over by the table that held Ingess. Her powdered hair had deflated and now hung to the middle of her back. She stared blankly down at His Royal and was laughing as though she was weeping. The healer's optical contraption was gone and Ingess's eyes were rolled back to show only white. His mouth was stretched wide as if trying to release a scream that was too large to fit through the opening.

"Quickly," said the healer, "to the kitchen."

Just then Pester came in leading a group of men – Chin Mokes, Grenis Saint-Geedon, Ringlat, and Durst. There was a whirl of frantic activity in which we were told to lift His Royal and carry him to the kitchen. Once there, we were instructed to tie him to the huge rotisserie spit on which the Exalted Culinarity would turn whole hogs at feast time. When His Royal was lashed securely to the long metal rod, the healer told Grenis to turn the handle and set it so that the patient's left ear was toward the floor. Then the old man called for Pester to bring a large pot and set it down in the ashes, where the fire usually burned, directly underneath His Royal's ear.

A moment after the boy set the pot down, a dollop of viscous white fluid dripped from His Royal's ear and splattered inside it. The assembled

company all took a step back at the sight of this. Then a steady stream of the goo began to fall, like beer from an open tap, filling the pot.

"He said we must let no harm come to this substance, no matter what happens to it," said Frouch, who had just arrived in the kitchen.

"What in the Devil's name is it?" asked Ringlat.

I turned to ask the healer the very same question, but he was no longer in the room.

"Nice work, Flam," said Chin Mokes, "you've turned the king into a flagon of goo."

"Where is that physician?" said Grenis Saint-Geedon, pulling a butcher knife from his rack. He left the room with a murderous look on his face.

Over the course of the next two hours, the pot filled nearly to the brim, and the healer was searched for everywhere but never found. At daybreak, Ingess opened his eyes and yawned.

The Palace Reparata rejoiced at the fact that His Royal had been returned to full health. It had been necessary to help him see to his needs for a week or so, but as soon as this period of convalescence had passed, he was up on his feet and performing his royal duties. Much of the hair he had lost had already begun to grow back, and he regained nearly all of his muscular vitality. The deep melancholy, though gone, had taken some small part of him with it, for now, in his face, there was a series of subtle lines that made him look more mature. No longer did he weep for hours on end. In fact, I did not witness one tear after the ordeal. Neither did he laugh, though, and this small formality was like a troublesome pebble in my shoe.

I went one night to the gardens to release the bats and found him, sitting on the bench across from the Fountain of the Dolphins, staring up at the moon.

"Durst gave a lecture today on the nature of the universe. His belief is that it began with a giant explosion," I said, and laughed too hard, trying to get him to join me.

Ingess merely shook his head. "Poor Durst," he said. "I never told you but I had sent for some word about him to the asylum that he wandered away from. It seems he had a twin brother who drowned when he was

ten. He might have saved him but he was too afraid of the water."

"His Royal," I said, exasperated with his response, "why do you stare at the moon?"

"Don't call me that anymore, Flam. I'm not a king. Just a pirate's grandson who was left far too much gold."

"As you wish," I said.

He turned then and forced a smile for me. "I want you to have Saint-Geedon prepare a feast. I need to thank everyone for their efforts to save my life."

I nodded and left him.

Later that night, I sought out Frouch and found her on the terrace that overlooks the reflecting pond. She was sitting in the shadow of a potted mimosa, feeding breadcrumbs to the peacocks.

I pulled up a chair and told her about the feast that would be held in another two days. She brightened at the prospect of this.

"I have a gown I've been waiting to wear," she said.

"How do you feel now that everything is back to normal?" I asked.

"You were brilliant as the Conscience of the King," she said.

"I'd rather put that entire affair behind me," I said. "But there is one thing that I still wonder about."

"The picture at the end of the healer's strange spectacles?" she said.

I shook my head. "What became of that muddle that dripped from Ingess's ear?"

She clapped her hands to send the birds scurrying away and sat forward. "You mean you haven't seen it?" she asked.

"No."

"Come now," she said, and stood. "You've got to see this."

She actually took my hand as we walked through hallways, and it made me somewhat nervous to find myself behind the protective field of her dangerous laughter.

We ended our journey in the small chapel at the northern end of the palace. The Ministress of Sleep, old Mrs. Kofnep, was just lighting a last votive candle as we entered. Beyond her, resting on the altar atop a satin pillow of considerable size was a huge ball with fine white hair growing all over it.

"There it is," said Frouch.

"That thing?" I asked, pointing.

Mrs. Kofnep greeted us and then turned her own gaze on the strange object. "I haven't decided if it's an egg or a testicle or a replica of the world," she said with a self-mocking smile.

"It took that form of a perfect sphere the day after it came from His Royal's head," said the countess.

"The white hair wasn't there two nights ago," said Mrs. Kofnep.

"I had it moved here to protect it," said Frouch.

We stared at it for some time, and then the Ministress of Sleep left us with the usual complaint about her insomnia.

The next day I was busy with preparations for the feast, but before turning in, I went back to the chapel to have another look at the oddity. Changes had obviously taken place, for now it was stretched out and tapered at either end with a large bulge in the middle. The white hair had grown profusely, and wrapped itself around to swaddle whatever was there gently undulating at its core.

The feast was held in the grand ballroom and the Exalted Culinarity had outdone himself with the exotic nature of the dishes served. Crow-liver pâté on paper-thin slices of candied amber was the appetizer. For the main course there was fowl, hog, beef, and even crocodile done up with fruit and vegetables to appear like tropical islands floating in calm seas of gravy. On each table was placed a punch bowl of Princess Jang's Tears, the drink that had of late become all the rage at Reparata.

Ringlat gave a benediction in which he likened the loss of Josette to highway robbery and our combined efforts to revive Ingess as the true power of the Law. With the exception of Mrs. Kofnep, none of us was overly religious. I looked around as Ringlat finished to see bowed heads and all manner of halfhearted religiously symbolic hand gesturing. When Durst took the podium, I was relived, knowing his drivel would cast out the seriousness of the Bishop's sermon. He did not disappoint. His gift to Ingess, as he put it, was the discovery of the meaning of Time. To represent his tangled ball of musings in a nutshell, he surmised from one side of his mouth that Time existed to make eternity pass more quickly, and from the other side that it served to make

it pass more slowly. We gave him a standing ovation and then started drinking.

Through the entire gala, His Royal sat on the dais, neither eating nor drinking, but nodding with a mechanical smile to one and all. By my third serving of the Tears, I forgot about my concern for him and stepped out on the dance floor with the countess. For that evening, she had applied a false beauty mark to her upper lip, and I found it remarkably alluring. At some point in her life, she had been beautiful, and on that evening, dressed in a cream-colored gown, her hair done up in two conical horns and decorated with mimosa blossoms, she approached her former radiance like a clock frozen at only a minute to midnight.

"Flam, your dancing leads me to believe I will have to guide you to your room later with a trail of bananas," she said, and whisper-giggled into my left ear. The sound of that laughter did not frighten me, but instead made my head spin as though it were Sirimon opening a new pathway to that portion of the brain that houses desire.

Chin Mokes walked on his hands. Pester spun like a dervish. The Illustrious Shepherd of Dust sang an aria about the unrequited love of a giant. The Majestic Seventh did impressions of farm animals until she passed out beneath the table which held the island of roasted hog. The ballroom was a swirling storm of good will and high spirits while at its center sat Ingess as though asleep with his eyes open. Not once did his smile disappear, not once did he miss a chance to shake hands or give a thank-you kiss, not once did he laugh.

Then, sometime well after the dessert of chocolate balloons, there was a shrill cry of distress and the room went absolutely silent. I looked up from my drink to see what had hushed the crowd and saw the Ministress of Sleep, Mrs. Kofnep, standing just inside the northern entrance to the ballroom, working madly to catch her breath.

"Come quickly," she cried, "something is happening in the chapel." She turned and left in great haste and we all followed.

The small chapel was just large enough to accommodate all of us as long as Pester sat atop Durst's shoulders. We crowded in, panting and perspiring from our dash through the Hall of Light and Shadow, across the rotunda of the Royal Museum, and then down the steps just past

the observatory. Upon the altar, the white entity, which I now knew to be a cocoon, rippled wildly, rocking and emitting sharp cries high and thin enough to pass through the eye of a needle.

There was an awed silence among the members of the court, and only Ingess had the wherewithal to draw his long dagger in case the expectant birth came forth a terror. People clutched each other as the white fabric of the thing began to tear with a sound like a fat man splitting his trousers. Ingess audibly groaned and his dagger clanked to the floor as the thing began to unfurl itself. An explosion of fine white powder was released at the moment of birth and then immediately blown away by some phantom breeze. When that cleared, I saw it above the altar, hovering in the air, a huge, diaphanous moth with wings as big as bed sheets. It looked only a hair more substantial than a ghost, glimmering in the light from the flickering votives.

The crowd became a chorus and voiced a gasp and then a sigh as the thing flapped its huge wings and flew above our heads toward the entrance. Pester, his face a mask of wonder, reached up toward it from where he sat on Durst's shoulders. His index finger ran along its underside as it passed into the hallway, and then his finger, like a flame going out, disappeared from his hand. The boy's mask of wonder became one of horror and he screamed. We meant to help him but by then the powder that had fallen from the moth reached our eyes. It caused in me a feeling of sorrow more deep than the one I experienced upon my mother's death when I was five. The entire court was reduced to tears. Only Ingess had not been affected. I saw him retrieve his dagger from the floor with the same stoic look he had worn at the feast.

When the effects of the moth's powder had worn off, we gathered round Pester to inspect his hand.

"There was no pain," he said. "Only inside, a sadness."

Some touched the spot where the digit had been, still unable to believe it was gone. Ringlat, knowing that as the Bishop he should do something profound at this point but having no clue as to what, took the boy's hand in his and kissed the nub. Mokes actually turned to Tendon Durst for an explanation, and the Philosopher General mumbled something about insect fear and the ringed planet. Chin nodded as if he

understood. The strange powder that had fallen now covered Frouch's beauty mark and somewhat disintegrated her power of enchantment. All jabbered like magpies, and the one thing that was finally decided upon was that strong drink was required. Before we left the chapel, Ingess apologized to us, especially Pester, since it had been his royal mind that had been responsible for the moth.

The evening ended with everyone, including the king, drinking themselves into oblivion. We wondered where the creature had wafted off to, but no one wanted to go in search of it. Sometime near daybreak, I and the others trudged like the walking dead to our sleeping chambers to feast on bad dreams. My last thought as I dozed off was of Frouch and her fleeting beauty.

Three days passed without a sign of the moth, and the court began to breathe easier, thinking that it was now time to put aside the tragic saga of Josette's death. I know that Ingess was approached by Saint-Geedon and some of the others about perhaps starting a project that might recapture the old spirit of Reparata, but His Royal very kindly put them off with promises that he would consider the suggestions.

On the night of the third day, while sitting in the garden with my cage of bats, I spotted the moth. It lifted slowly up like a dispossessed thought of ingenious proportion from behind a row of hedges, causing me to drop my pipe into my lap. I considered running, but its fluid grace as it moved along the wall of green hypnotized me. When I finally adjusted to the shock of its arrival, I noticed that same sound Sirimon had made when cavorting in Ingess's head. In less than a minute it had left a good span of hedge completely devoid of vegetation. Only a mere skeleton of branches remained. I nervously lifted the latch on the bat cage, thinking that their presence might frighten it away. As always they swarmed frantically out and around the garden, but none of them would dare go near the moth. Before I moved from my seat, I saw it consume an entire rose bush, a veritable mile of trailing vine, all of Josette's tiger lilies, and the foliage of an immense weeping willow.

The next morning, the moth having disappeared again, the court gathered in the garden, or I should say where the garden had been. Its

destruction was so complete that I could count on my hands the number of leaves still clinging to their branches. There was a certain sadness about the destruction of that special place, but for the time being it was blanketed by a stronger sense of amazement at the enormity of the thing's appetite and its efficiency in satisfying it.

"Do we have a large net?" asked the Chancellor of Waste.

"Why, do you want to be the one to wrestle with it?" asked Pester, holding up his hand for all to see.

"It must be destroyed," said Ringlat, "it's far too dangerous."

"But it is beautiful," said the Illustrious Seventh.

"The garden was beautiful," countered the Bishop. "This thing is evil."

Ingess stepped into the middle of the crowd and turned to look at each of us. "The moth is not to be harmed," he said.

"But it is not righteous," said Ringlat.

"The moth is not to be harmed on pain of death," said Ingess without anger and then turned and strode away toward the palace.

The members of the court said nothing, but each looked at his or her shoes like scolded children. A death threat from Ingess was like an arrow through the heart of Reparata. In that moment, we felt its spirit dissolve.

"Death?" said Chin Mokes when His Royal was out of earshot. He shook his head sadly. The others did the same as they wandered aimlessly away from the missing garden.

I called to Frouch to wait up for me, but to my surprise she turned and continued on toward the palace.

As we soon learned, the garden was only the beginning. On the next evening the ethereal glutton invaded the closets of the southern wing and, moving from room to room, devoured all of the linens and finery of those who resided there. All that remained by way of clothing was the outfits those court members had arrived at Reparata in, which had long ago been stored away in trunks. The next day I met the Chancellor of Waste at breakfast, and he was wearing the clown outfit that, in his previous life, had been his uniform. The shoes were enormous, the tie too short, the jacket striped and the pants checkered. In a loud voice, he

desperately tried to explain and his embarrassment was contagious. It was a disarming sight to see half the royalty of court traipsing about in threadbare attire.

Ingess assigned the royal accountant to bring gold so that new fashions could be sent for immediately, but when the doors of the counting house were opened, allowing the sunlight access, the moth was startled into flight and brushed past the accountant. When he was finally able to clear his eyes of the insect's powder and his mind of its resultant depression, he discovered that the creature had a taste for more than just leaves and clothing. A good half of that immense trove of gold was gone.

All were skeptical of the story the accountant told, suspecting him of theft, since he had actually been a pickpocket earlier in his life. A few nights later, though, when the moth returned, more than one witnessed its consumption of jewelry, and Saint-Geedon vouched that it had, in minutes, done away with every place setting of the royal silverware. Ingess had even lost his crown to it, but still, in the face of strident requests that it be exterminated, he refused to relent on his command that it not be harmed.

I went to visit Frouch in her rooms the morning after it dined in our quadrant of the palace. My own wardrobe had vanished through the night along with just about everything else I owned. When I knocked on the countess's door I was wearing my old jacket missing an arm and the trousers I had wandered a thousand miles in, whose gaping knee holes made the bottom half of each leg almost superfluous. Putting these things on again was very difficult, and for a moment I considered simply going about in my bathrobe as the healer had.

There was no answer from the countess, and I was about to leave when I heard something from beyond the door that I at first mistook for the sound of Sirimon. I listened more closely and it came to me that it was Frouch, weeping. In a moment of madness, I opened the door and entered anyway.

"Countess," I called.

"Go away, Flam," she said.

"What's wrong?" I asked, though I already had a good idea.

"Don't come in here," she said, but I had to make sure she was all right.

She stood in the middle of her room, wearing the short, revealing dress she had worn ten years earlier when walking the streets of Gile. Her hair was down and unpowdered to show its true mousey brown and gray.

"The dream is finished, Flam," she said, looking up at me with a face that showed every hard moment she had ever lived.

I wanted to comfort her, but I did not know how.

"Countess," I said, and took a step forward.

"Countess," she said, and laughed in a way that drilled my heart more thoroughly than Sirimon could have.

"Come walk with me," I said. "Let's get some air."

"Get away from me," she said.

Her response angered me greatly. I left her there and went to walk the corridors, talking to myself as if I were Durst. Passing the large oval mirror outside of the library, I caught a glimpse of a fool, jawing away, dressed in my old rags, his hair undone and wild. I knew now what I had looked like years earlier to the inhabitants of those towns I had visited and been evicted from. I needed to get a hold on reality, and so decided to go to the palace attic and do some dusting. I trudged up the long flight of steps, assuring myself that work was the cure for my woes.

I threw back the door of that hidden sanctuary, and saw instantly that the moth had visited. The creature had cleaned the place out completely, leaving not one candelabrum, not the slightest feather from the eagle decoration that had been made for the holidays five years earlier. All of the old objects I had so scrupulously cared for over the years were gone.

"No," I said, and the word echoed out to the far reaches of the empty expanse. Then it struck me that the moth had devoured my very title. The gardens no longer needed bats, the things in the attic did not require dusting, and as for my Monday proclamations, I had been making them long before I ever came to Reparata. At least when I was the High and Mighty of Next Week, the promise of the future always loomed ahead, calling me on. Now, all that was left was the past.

When the moth began devouring the very marble structure of the palace, Ringlat, Chin Mokes, and the Chancellor of Waste hatched a conspiracy to do away with it. Many of the others had agreed to help them. As it was put to me when they attempted to conscript me into their plot, "Ingess is not in his right mind. We have to save him again." I was told that Saint-Geedon had been chosen, because of his skills as an assassin, to form a plan to strike the insect down. What was I to do but agree?

I had often wondered what the link was between the professions of hired killer and chef, because Grenis had made the transition from one to the other almost overnight when he chose Reparata as his home. After I watched him create the bomb, though, I no longer had any questions. The outer casing of the device was made from a thick crusted peasant bread called Latcha, which was a main staple of the farmers in the surrounding countryside. Through a small hole he cut in the top of the loaf, he dug out the dough, leaving it as hollow as a jack-o-lantern. Next came a strange mixture of chemicals and cooking powders, each of which he measured out in exact amounts. To this he added boxes of nails and pieces of sharp metal. For the finishing touch, he asked Pester to bring him the vanilla.

"What does that do?" I asked.

"For sweetness," he said.

To create the fuse, he pan-fried over a low fire a long piece of string in some of the same ingredients that were used in the main course. When the string had cooled, he inserted one end into the bread, replaced the cap of crust he had cut, and then garnished the outside with radishes cut into florets. We gave him a round of applause to which he clicked his heels and nodded sharply.

The moon couldn't have been brighter the night we put our plan into action. It had been decided that we would lay the trap outside the walls of the palace so as not to chance destroying anymore of the quickly diminishing structure. Just beyond the gates, there was a deep moat that ran the circumference of Reparata. We crept cautiously out across the drawbridge, which, since there was little threat of invasion in those times, was always left down.

Ten yards off the bridge, and twenty yards to the surrounding tree line, we heaped up a pile of whatever belongings still remained to us. Those who had nothing to give removed curtains from the few rooms that had not been visited yet by the moth. Within this hill of things, we planted the bomb, and then ran the long fuse over to the tree line where we took up positions, hiding in the shadows at the edge of the woods.

There were more than twenty of us in the group. Because I was nervous that Ingess might discover our treachery or that we might fail, I didn't notice that the countess was among the conspirators until we stood beneath the trees. She had somewhere gotten a set of men's clothing and her hair was tied back.

"Frouch," I whispered, "I didn't know you were part of this."

"I hope that bomb blows the damned bug to tatters, the same way it did my life," she said. There was an edge to her voice I had never heard before.

I reached out and put my hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off and lit a cigarette. I meant to ask her what I had done to make her cross with me, but just then the Philosopher General whispered a duet of, "Behold, the floating hunger."

It flew slowly out past the open gates of Reparata, its wings quietly beating the air. The powder it threw off caught the moonlight and created a misty aura around it. Its antennae twitched at the scent of curtain silk, gown muslin, old shoes, strings of pearls, and the deadly loaf at their center. When it landed with the lightness of a dream feather and began to dine, Saint-Geedon turned to Frouch and nodded. She flicked the ash off her cigarette, puffed it hard three times and then put the burning end to the tip of the fuse. The tiny spark was away in an instant, eating the treated string faster than even the creature could.

Frouch licked her lips, Ringlat rubbed his hands together, and the Chancellor of Waste wheezed excitedly as that dot of fizzling orange raced toward explosion. When it was exactly halfway to the heap where the moth was busy vanishing an old topcoat, who should appear at the palace gates but Ingess dressed in full battle armor and mounted on Drith, his nag of a warhorse. The moment we saw him there, it was obvious he had finally come to his senses and decided to slay the creature as

his subjects had begged him. He drew his long sword, pointed it at the moth and then spurred the old horse in the flanks.

As His Royal reached the middle of the drawbridge, the spark reached the loaf. We braced ourselves for apocalypse but all that followed was a miserable little pop, weaker than a champagne cork, and the issuance of a slight stream of smoke. The moth flapped upward in a panic, unharmed, but this sudden motion frightened Drith and he reared on his hind legs, throwing Ingess from his back and into the deep waters of the moat.

The ridiculous course of events left me standing with my mouth open wide. Everyone was stunned by the misadventure.

Then Frouch yelled, "He'll drown in that armor!"

She took two steps past me, but I saw that someone else had already begun sprinting toward the moat. It was Durst, and I had never seen his lumpen form move with such speed in all the years I had known him. He did not hesitate at the edge, but awkwardly formed his hands together into an arrowhead in front of him, kicked up his heels in the back, and dove into the water. At the sight of this, we all started running.

I don't know how he found him in the dark at the bottom of that moat, nor do I know how he lifted him to the surface and brought him to the bank. Ringlat and I reached down and pulled His Royal up onto dry land. Pester and Chin Mokes did the same with Durst. In seconds we had Ingess's helmet off, and much to my relief found that he was still faintly breathing.

"He's alive," yelled Ringlat, and the assembled company shouted.

Frouch helped us remove the rest of the armor as the others gathered round Durst, patting his head and slapping him on the back. I stole a look at him in the middle of my work and saw that he had lost his spectacles. When I noticed he was no longer bent by the weight of his twin, I had a feeling he would not be needing them.

Whereas the night had brought a miraculous opportunity to the Philosopher General, His Royal had not fared so well. We freed him of his armor, but no manner of nudging, tapping, massaging, could wake him from unconsciousness. My fear that he had been too long underwater without air seemed now to be a fact. Still, we gathered him up

and brought him back inside the palace. The structures of the buildings were no longer sound because of the work of the moth, so we carried one of the last remaining beds out into the courtyard and laid him on that. Then we gathered around him like dwarfs around a poisoned princess in a fairy tale and waited with far too much hope than could reasonably be expected.

The other members of the court who were not part of our ill-fated plot now came out of the palace to join us, bringing reports of what little remained in the wake of the moth. Ingess's fortune was now completely gone, the food stores, with the exception of an old pot of moldy cremat, were thoroughly decimated.

"The place is as empty as my heart," said the Illustrious Seventh, who in her ripped tunic from yesteryear was looking none too illustrious.

We stayed in that courtyard through the remainder of the night and the following day, standing around, watching His Royal's every faint breath. From off in the distance came the occasional sounds of some piece of the architecture crumbling and falling with a thunderous crash, having been undermined by the moth's earlier dining. I witnessed with my own eyes the fall of the eastern parapet. It slouched and fell, tons of marble, like a sandcastle in the surf.

When the young ones began to complain of hunger there was nothing to give them. None of us had been at Reparata long enough to forget that feeling of utter need. Frouch and some of the others discussed possibilities of where to find food, but nothing came readily to mind. Then Ringlat removed his Bishop's robe, throwing it to the ground. Beneath, he was dressed in the black costume of the highwayman. He borrowed a scarf from one of the ladies and tied it around his face just beneath his eyes.

"Flam," he said. "If I'm not back by nightfall, you will have to think of something else." We watched him run across the courtyard to where Drith stood drinking from a small fountain. With one leap, he went atop the back of the horse and landed in its saddle. Grabbing the reigns, he spun the mount to the left, whipped it and gave it his heels. The old nag responded and, together, they were off like a shot through the gates of Reparata.

The day was as long as any I have ever witnessed. The afternoon dragged on as our expectations of His Royal's recovery grew more faint than his breathing. When things became almost intolerable and some of the very young had begun to cry, the Chancellor of Waste gathered them all together and, borrowing some small objects from the crowd (my pipe, a pocket watch, a knife), began juggling. Occasionally, he would allow one of the things to hit him on the head before he caught it and sent it back into the cycle. This drew some laughter from the children. For we who were older, the transformation of the chancellor himself, from fatuous ass to merry buffoon, was marvelous enough to bring a smile in spite of the predicament our king was in. He juggled, acted idiotic, and performed pratfalls for hours, until he finally slumped down onto the ground in exhaustion. The children ran to him and, climbing upon his back, used him as a boat while he slept.

"What are we going to do?" Frouch asked as we stood together at twilight, staring down at Ingess, whose condition hadn't changed all day.

I shook my head. "I'm lost," I said.

"We can't stay here any longer," she told me and I wasn't sure by the tone of her voice if she was talking about the entire court or just the two of us.

There was no time to question her about this because, just then, Ringlat came charging across the drawbridge on Drith. With one hand he clutched the horse's reigns and with the other he held tightly to a bulging cloth gathered up at one end and thrown over his shoulder.

"Dinner," he called as he leaped down from his mount. When he spread the cloth out at our feet, we saw it was filled with all manner of food.

"It seems the lord provides, Bishop," I said to him as everyone crowded around to take something.

"In this case, the lord taketh away. Righteous robbery, Flam," he said. "That road to Enginstan always was a favorite of mine."

"In broad daylight?" I said.

He shrugged, "I wouldn't make a habit of it, but it seems my reputation still lives. When all I demanded was food, they were more than happy to comply. How many do you know who can claim to have been

robbed by Ringlat and lived to tell of it? Something to pass down to their grandchildren."

"You're a generous man," I told him as he searched around for where he had dropped his Bishop's robe.

There was just enough to eat in that sack to quiet the children and calm the adults. The last crumb of the last loaf was finished just as night settled in. We knew the moth was about, because as soon as darkness was upon us we could hear pieces of the palace coming down. I called for everyone to gather in close to Ingess in case any of the surrounding facades might give way. It was cold and we huddled together on the ground, a human knot around His Royal. The answer to the question I never got to ask Frouch earlier was answered when she took a place beside me and leaned against my shoulder. I put my arm around her and she closed her eyes.

Some slept but I stared numbly into the dark and listened to the destruction of Reparata. It was just after I was sure I heard the southern colonnade drop into the reflecting pond that Pester stood up.

"It's coming for us," he screamed in a shrill voice, pointing up above with his missing finger.

I looked up at what I at first mistook for the moon, but soon saw was the moth, slowly descending from a great height. The powder was falling toward us, and I roused everyone as quickly as possible so as to have them escape its ill effects. Groggy and scared, the company moved quickly back away from Ingess, since it appeared precisely there that the moth would land.

"Will it eat him?" asked Frouch as we looked on in horror, totally powerless to stop it.

"It took Pester's finger with no problem, it devoured solid marble," I said.

The others around us started to yell and wave their arms in an attempt to frighten it away, but the moth, as lovely as a delicate blossom on the breeze, continued its descent, showering His Royal with its powder. Frouch turned away as it came to rest, laying its body upon the entire length of Ingess. A groan went up from the assembled court as the moth wrapped its wings around him like a pale winding sheet. I

watched through tears, expecting at any moment to see the huge insect lift off and leave behind an empty bed. Instead, it gave a long mournful cry and before our eyes, like magic, dissipated into a light fog that continued to hang about the body. Then Ingess roused, filling his lungs with an enormous gasp, and the airy remains of the moth entered him through his mouth and nostrils. He opened his eyes and sat up, and when he finally exhaled, it came as a blast of laughter.

As I approached him, he held his hand out to me, and I could see in his eyes that mischievous look from before the tragedy. He told us that while he was unconscious, he had been with Josette in the garden. She told him to stop grieving or she would never be happy. "We must slough off the cocoon of Reparata," he said.

"That won't be difficult," said Chin Mokes, "there's nothing left."

At this, Ingess laughed again as he had on the day when he bestowed upon me the title of High and Mighty of Next Week. We gathered around him for the last time, penniless, homeless, facing an uncertain future.

The next day, after tearful goodbyes, we left the broken shell of Reparata and scattered out across the countryside like a brood of newborn insects. Without a word between us, Frouch and I decided to travel together. Life on the road was hard, but we had each other to rely on. For no good reason, we made our way to the coast and ended our journey in, of all places, Gile. I became a fisherman on one of the boats and Frouch took a job serving drinks in the tavern. It was a funny thing, but no one ever recognized her from her earlier days. The only one who remembered was the tavern keeper, and he told the customers who asked that she was royalty in disguise.

I had heard that Ingess eventually married again and took up farming. He became famous far and wide for the prodigious nature of his crops and the generous prices at which he sold them. It became known by all those who might have fallen on hard times that his home was a place of refuge. Although I think of them often, I cannot say what became of the rest of the royal court of Reparata. All I know is that years later, when an evil tyrant arose in the north and threatened war on the entire territory, he was found one morning with his throat slit,

a gob of spit on his forehead, and smelling strangely of vanilla.

As for that healer, Frouch overheard, at the tavern one evening, a visiting merchant speak of an old man in a bathrobe he had encountered in a drinking establishment in the distant port of Mekshalan. "It seems the old man had arrived with a flea circus that he was sure would cure the Great Pasha's crippling disease of exquisite boredom," said the merchant. "He showed me the circus and I saw nothing but meager black specks hopping about. When I asked him if he thought they were so entertaining they would lift the great one out of his boredom, he shook his head and said, 'Of course not, but when they get loose in his beard and turban, he'll have plenty to do.'"

In the evenings when I come in off the bay, Frouch is waiting for me at the table by the window of the tavern with plates of food and two glasses of Princess Jang's Tears. As night falls we head home to our little shack in the dunes, light a fire and lay together, conversing and watching the play of shadows on the ceiling. In those shifting projections, I have had glimpses of Reparata, and Ingess and Josette. An image of the moth also frequently appears there, but the persistent beating of its wings no longer frightens me now that I have learned there are some things in this world that can never be devoured.

Letters from Tainaron

(AN EXCERPT FROM THE SHORT NOVEL *Tainaron*)

LEENA KROHN

Translated by Hildi Hawkins

THE SEVENTEENTH SPRING

IN TAINARON, many things are different from at home. The first things that occur to me are eyes. For with many of the people here, you see, they grow so large that they take up as much as one third of their faces. Whether that makes their sight more accurate, I do not know, but I presume they see their surroundings to some extent differently from us. And, moreover, their organs of sight are made up of countless cones, and in the sunlight their lens-surfaces glitter like rainbows. At first I was troubled when I had to converse with such a person, for I could never be sure whether he was looking at me or past me. It no longer worries me. It is true that there are also people whose eyes are as small as points, but then there are many of them, in the forehead, at the ends of the antennae, even on the back.

Like their eyes, Tainaronians may have a number of pairs of hands and feet, too, but it does not seem to me that they run any faster than we do, or get more done in their lives. Some of them, it is true, have a jumping fork under their bellies, which they can, whenever necessary, release like a lever and thus hurl themselves forward, sometimes by dozens of metres.

The hustling forest of antennae and pedipalpi in the streets at rush-hour is certainly an extraordinary sight for people like us, but most difficult of all is to accustom oneself to a certain other phenomenon that marks the life of the majority of the inhabitants here in the city. This phenomenon is metamorphosis; and for me, at least, it is so strange, to

my very marrow, that even to think about it makes me feel uncomfortable. For, you see, the people here live two or many consecutive lives, which may have nothing in common, although one follows from the last in a way that is incomprehensible to me.

We, too, change, but gradually. We are used to a certain continuity, and most of us have a character that remains more or less constant. It is different here. It remains a mystery to me what the real connection is between two consecutive lives. How can a person who changes so completely still say he is in any sense the same as before? How can he continue? How can he remember?

Here you can bump into a stranger, and he will come up to you like an old acquaintance and begin to remember some past amusing coincidence that you apparently experienced together. When you ask, "When?" he laughs and answers: "When I was someone else."

But perhaps you will never discover with whom you have the honour of conversing, for they often change comprehensively and completely, both their appearance and their way of life.

There are also those who withdraw into total seclusion for as much as seventeen years. They live in tiny rooms, no more than boxes; they do not see anyone, do not go anywhere, and hardly eat. But whether they sleep or wake there, they are continually changing and forsaking the form they had before.

Seventeen years! And when, finally, the seventeenth spring arrives, they step out of their hermit caves into full sunlight. And there begins their only summer, for in the autumn they die; but all summer long they celebrate all the more. What a life! Do you understand it?

But sometimes I feel a little envious: to be able to curl up in a pupal cell without hoping for dreams, knowing that one spring one will step before the eyes of the world, new, refreshed, free from the past.…

Farewell once more; my head is heavy and I believe a thunderstorm is brewing. I ponder the reasons why you do not reply, and there are many. Are you dead? Have you moved? The city where you lived has perhaps disappeared from the face of the earth? And can I trust the mail of Tainaron; who knows on what back-garden compost-heap my letters are languishing? Or you stand on your doormat turning my letter over

in your hands; turning it over and then putting it aside unopened, on top of the pile of newspapers and advertisements that grows and grows in the dusty corner.

BURNING ON THE MOUNTAIN

Behind the hillock where the amusement park of Tainaron is built rises another hillock, dim with distance. From time to time, at midnight moments, I have seen a fire blazing on its highest peak, small but very bright.

How I loved to look at it once. I thought about campfires and guitars, shared meals and hikers resting and telling stories after the exertions of the road. But later I began to suspect that it was perhaps not, after all, a campfire, but some kind of beacon, for it always lit so high up and it can be seen so far away in every direction; particularly, however, down in the city of Tainaron.

Some days ago I happened to mention the fire on the mountain to Longhorn, my guide, and I immediately felt embarrassed, for my question made his face grow harsh and severe. I had hardly ever seen such an expression on his calm face.

"Do not look at it; it is not for you," he enjoined me quickly. "When the time of the new moon comes, draw the curtains and go to sleep."

The time of the new moon.... Longhorn was right. I had last seen the fire about a month earlier, and that night there had been a new moon. The earth had cast a long shadow, and perhaps it was for that reason that the fire blazed so large and solitary. And had not two cycles of the moon passed since the earlier blaze?

Even though Longhorn had grown so uncommunicative-looking, I made so bold as to ask: "Tell me: Who lights those bonfires?"

"They are no bonfires," he said, and his voice did not grow any milder. "They are not intended to delight the eye, and their ashes are not used for baking root vegetables."

"What are they, then?" I asked, and I realised my voice had dropped to a whisper.

"Burnt offerings, sacrifices. They are sacrifices," he replied.

I felt I had known before I asked.

"Who is sacrificed?" I asked. In admiring the blaze, had I not noted a light smell hovering over the city?

"Why do you keep asking?" Longhorn cried, growing angry. "They set fire to themselves."

But I could not stop; I went on, stubbornly: "But who are they? What do they want?"

Longhorn had turned his back to me and was pretending to examine my books. The conversation seemed repugnant in the extreme to him, and I was ashamed of my own tactlessness. Nevertheless, I felt that if I could solve the mystery of the fire I would also understand why some people chose destruction as if it were a privilege.

But Longhorn shrugged his back-armour wearily.

"What do they want, you ask. They are sectarian delusions. To redeem Tainaron, I suppose that is what they want. That the Tainaronians should live differently from how they do. That they should wake up from their sleep; that is what they say. Mad!"

And he shook his fists at the mist-clad mountain that bowed over the city. "How many innocent souls will they yet take with them to the pyre?"

Yesterday it was new moon once more. Early in the evening, I had done exactly as Longhorn had instructed me: I had drawn the curtains across my windows. But after I had gone to bed I could not sleep, and it seemed to me that a red colour was shining through the curtains.

Then I got up, went on to the balcony and immediately saw the bale-fire, high on the mountain in the darkness of the new moon. None of the lights of Tainaron – not its neon colours, not the lights of its Ferris wheel – burned as brightly as the fire on the mountain. There it blazed, attracting the gazes of the city-dwellers as a lamp attracts moths. Even from miles away it was dazzling, and made my face glow.

Last night was calm, and the sacrifice burned evenly. It was a candle on the table, the night's focus and its terrible purifier. Who was he who was burning with such a high and unwavering flame? What did he believe he knew that no one in the valley of Tainaron knew, which was more than life, more than his own boiling tears and his scalding eyes? Was it as clearly visible to him as the fire on the mountain was to me?

To me, lingering on the balcony; to me, who could not take my eyes off the fire, was no justification to him, no expiation, no comfort.

And I had gazed on the blaze as if it were a midnight flower, rejoicing!

No, as long as the sacrifice burned, I could not go to sleep, could not concentrate on anything. I stood on the balcony until he, whoever he was, had turned from fire into embers and from embers into ashes.

Will there ever be a new moon when there is no need to light a fire high on the hill?

THEIR INNUMERABLE DWELLINGS

Tainaron is full of voices of a kind I have not heard anywhere else. Here I have come to realise that there is no clear dividing line between music and language. For the citizens, you see, secrete their voices from themselves which can be interpreted sometimes as speech, sometimes as music. I do not mean they sing; that is, at least, not very common here. Neither do they play instruments of any kind; instead, their voices are created with the help of muscles, glands and guts or chitin armature.

Their voices may well up from a surprising depth, as if from leagues away, so that it is no wonder that they are often so difficult to locate. For, you see, the Tainaronians' way of life is a very curious one. You will perhaps not have heard that they often have a number of dwellings, but not only in the way that we have city apartments and summer villas. No: the people here are able to live in many dwellings at the same time, as in a nest of boxes. Some of them carry their innermost apartment, a one-roomed flat which fits their dimensions like a glove, with them everywhere. But this has the drawback that one cannot always make sense of what they say, for it echoes and reverberates from the walls of their private apartments. It is also vexing to me that I cannot always tell where the dwelling ends and its inhabitant begins.

Poor things, who never come among people without this innermost shield. It reflects the terrible vulnerability of their lives. Their little home may be made of the most diverse ingredients: grains of sand, bark, straw, clay, leaves.... But it protects them better than others are protected by armour, from every direction, and it is a direct continua-

tion of themselves, much more so than clothes are to you or me. But if it is taken away from them, they die – perhaps simply of shame, perhaps because their skins are too soft for the outside air, or because they do not have any skin at all.

Who would be so cruel as to tear from them this last shield! Oh, I have heard that such things, too, happen here in Tainaron; I have been startled by the moans of death-throes in the deeps of the night.

But I have my own theory concerning why this happens. For, you see, those who constantly drag their houses with them remain unknown to other people. One can gain only a brief glimpse of them, if that; they are always in hiding.

And then there are those who cannot bear such a situation, those who wish to see everything face to face and to reveal, open, show the whole world the nakedness of things.... Now and then the temptation becomes overwhelming to them, and they split open the house of some poor unfortunate. I awake to shrieking, sigh and turn over – and soon fall asleep again.

LIKE BURYING BEETLES

You do not reply. It is something that stays in my mind almost incessantly. The reasons for this silence are perhaps independent of you; or then again not. But I continue writing – that freedom I do allow myself – and I believe, I trust – well, no more of that!

There is much here that reminds me of former things, particularly of the city in which we once lived, close to each other. For example, a particular office window brings to mind another shop window on the far side of the green and white Oceanos.

I walked past it almost every day, but I never stopped in front of it, because it was always the same. Behind the glass hung a skilfully draped blue curtain; in front of it were set a stone urn and a wreath of flowers tied with a white silk ribbon.

There is such a shop in Tainaron, too, but its windows display not urns but small, very beautiful boxes. One day I went inside with Longhorn, who continues to guide me patiently from day to day in this city.

Someone had died, someone who I heard only now had been alive

and who had known Longhorn, perhaps well, so that it was his task now to care for the funeral arrangements. I followed Longhorn because I had often, passing by, looked at those small boxes, and I wanted to examine them more closely.

The shop was empty as we stepped inside, but on the shelves that ran along the walls I saw more boxes, of all shapes, some smaller even than matchboxes, and the largest the size of books. They were covered in multicoloured fine fabrics, or painted or engraved with marks and symbols whose meaning I did not understand. What astonished me the most was their smallness. Among the Tainaronians, it is true, there are some very small races, but even for the smallest baby these boxes were far too small.

"Are these urns?" I asked Longhorn, who was examining brochures at the counter. "Are they used for dead people's ashes?"

"Ashes? No, there is no crematorium here," he said. "They are used for a single organ, often an eye or an antenna. But sometimes the family may choose part of a wing, a part with a beautiful pattern."

I fingered one of the boxes. It was as delicate and pretty as a confectionery box, and lined in white silk. I remembered that I had once, as a child, received just such a box, in which there had been sweeties. It had been Easter morning, and I had just been allowed to get out of bed for the first time after a bout of bronchitis. I am still seeking the purity, the silken whiteness and the colours of the metallic foil of that convalescent morning, its pussy-willows, its feather-tufts, in the world.

"What happens to the rest of the body?" I asked, wrapped in my thoughts, but Longhorn did not reply, for out of the back room, at that moment, stepped the funeral director, a very imposing man. Most noticeable about him was, however, not his size, but his colours: they were as bright as the complicated patterns of the boxes. His chest ranged from green to lemon, while the knobs of his antennae were as yellow as clementines. He bowed elegantly, and was surrounded by a cloud of scent which I recognised only after a moment: it was undoubtedly musk.

He became absorbed, with Longhorn, in a conversation conducted in low voices, in conclusion of which one of the boxes was chosen from the shelf, round and grass-green, with sky-blue crescent moons.

When the funeral director turned to tap at the cash register, I went up to Longhorn and asked once more: "What happens to the rest of the body?"

I was a little startled at Longhorn's look, for it betrayed irritation, from which I understood immediately that my question was unseemly. All the same, I waited for his answer.

"Do you really want to know?" he asked.

"Why not? I am interested in everything," I said with some hauteur, and when he continued in silence, I asked again, with real curiosity, "Is there something secret about it, then?"

"Very well," said Longhorn, somewhat coolly. Suddenly he stepped up to the funeral director and whispered a couple of words to him, pointing in my direction.

The funeral director looked at me strangely, from head to foot, bowed once more in his cultivated way, and asked me to follow him. I looked interrogatively at Longhorn, and he growled: "Go on, I'll stay here."

The funeral director had already reached the back room and was waiting for me, silent but smiling. He opened a door leading to a badly lit stairway, which smelt of cellars and fish; or that is what I thought then. The funeral director gestured for me to walk in front of him, but when I shook my head he stepped past me into the gloom. My curiosity had now completely disappeared, but I followed the strange figure lower and lower down the steep and uneven stairs, regretting my frivolous wish for information. The deeper we went, the more uncomfortable I felt, above all because of the increasingly strong smell. Finally I stopped, intending to return to ground level without delay, but as it turned out the funeral director was now behind me, so close that his yellow chest was nearly touching my back and his musky vapours mixed with still odder scents. I continued my descent unhappily, for one way or another the man was pushing me forward, gently enough, it is true, but so firmly that it was no longer impossible for me to retreat.

"The fish is rotten," I thought, but the smell of decay had already grown to a stench that filled my lungs with nausea. I scarcely realised that we had arrived in a great vault, and that it was filled with an extraordinary bustling.

I could no longer see my guide anywhere. I felt faint, and pressed my back against the damp stone wall. I already realised that I had been brought into a sepulchre. Before me on the earthen floor lay carcasses without number, but about them was such a ceaseless bustle that at times it looked as if there were still some degree of life in them. Around me moved dozens of creatures that were reminiscent in their appearance of the funeral director, but whose clothing was – if possible – still more brilliant. The more closely I examined them and their work, the more they reminded me of the toil of burying beetles.

I had descended into the Hades of Tainaron. I had asked: "What happens to the bodies?," and the answer to my question was now before my eyes. One of the most prosaic and indispensable of the functions of the city of Tainaron was carried out here, shielded from the gaze of passers-by; but as I looked at their toil, my horror gave way and made space for impartial examination, even respect.

I spoke of Hades and a sepulchre, but in reality the space in which I found myself served the opposite purpose: it was a dining room and a nursery. Those who toiled here were not merely workers; they were also, above all, mothers. Now I could see that around every larger form flocked a swarm of smaller creatures, its offspring. As they did the work that had to be done for life in this city to be at all possible, these workers were at the same time feeding their heirs; and if the way in which they did it was not to my taste, where would I find more convincing proof of the never-broken alliance between destruction and florescence, birth and death?

So: there was a carcass, of which one could no longer detect who or what it had been when it was alive, so decomposed were its features. But I no longer felt sick, although I saw one of the mothers poking about in its pile of dross. For that was where the mother sought nourishment for her heirs, her snout buried in the stinking carcass, and look! There glistened a dark droplet, which one of the little ones drank, and after a moment the second received its share, and the third; no one was forgotten.

And here, then, was their work: to distil pure nectar from such filth, to extract from the slimy liquid of death health, strength and new life.

How could I ever complain about what took place in the Hades of Tainaron. Truly, it is a laboratory compared to which even the greatest achievements of the alchemists are put to shame; but all that is done there is what the earth achieves every year when it builds a new spring from and on what rotted and died in the autumn.

"Have you seen enough?" someone asked behind me. I turned and saw Longhorn, who was standing at the mouth of the corridor, looking at me in a troubled way. I do not know whether his expression was caused merely by the stench, which my own nose hardly sensed any longer, or whether it was real grief. For his friend had just died, and I had hardly spared a thought for his feelings. But when our eyes met, I, too, felt the bite of suffering.

The kindness of his eyes! How had I never noticed it before. And they were so dazzlingly black, so wise and alive.... But in fact I have seen just such a gaze before, and more than once. I have seen it – do not be shocked – in your eyes, too, different as they are. I have encountered it – or seen it pass me by – among acquaintances and strangers, at parties, in department stores, in my own home, in trains, on stations and in lecture halls, shops and cafés; in summer, in the great lime trees in the park, where cast-iron benches have been placed for the citizens; and I am sure that at unguarded moments it has also resided in my own eyes.

That it ever disappears! It was the impossible, and unbearable, thing that, as I turned to look behind me and met Longhorn's eyes, was relentless in us both, and the strange meal we were following as onlookers offered no solution.

The soundless glitter of immense treasures – That it could be extinguished and sink into the cold mass of raw material is if it had not been anything more than the moisture of lachrymal fluid on the surface of the cornea....

"Come away," said Longhorn, with unexpected softness, and we left Hades without looking at each other again.

The Ride of the Gabbleratchet

FROM *The Modern World*, PUBLISHED AS *Dangerous Offspring* IN THE UNITED STATES

STEPH SWAINSTON

I WAS STANDING on the cold Osseous steppe, where the horse people come from. It was twilight and silent; the sky darkening blue with few stars. Around me stretched a flat jadeite plain of featureless grass. A marsh with dwarf willow trees surrounded a shallow river; deep clumps of moss soaking with murky water and haunted by midges. Far on the other side of the river a silhouette line of hazy, scarcely visible hills marked the end of the plain.

In the distance I saw a village of the Equinne's black and red corrugated metal barns, looking like plain blocks. Between them was one of their large communal barbecues, a stand on a blackened patch of earth where they roast vegetables. A freezing mist oozed out between the barns to lie low over the grassy tundra.

I couldn't see any Equinnes, ominously because they spend most of their time outdoors and only sleep in their barns. They're so friendly they normally race to greet strangers.

The Vermiform had reassembled – she stood a head taller than me. She said, "We told Membury and the Equinnes that even when the Gabbleratchet vanishes they must not come out for a few hours."

"Where is it now?" I asked. The Vermiform pointed up to the sky above the hills. I strained to make out a faint grey fleck, moving under the stars at great speed. It turned and seemed to lengthen into a column. I gasped, seeing creatures chasing wildly through the air, weaving around each other.

"It has already seen us," the Vermiform chorused. Worms began to

slough off her randomly and burrow into the grass. "When I say run, run. It won't be able to stop. Don't run too soon or it will change course. Be swift. Nothing survives it. If it catches you we won't find one drop of blood left. Beware, it also draws people in."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't look at it for too long. It will mesmerize you."

It was an indistinguishable, broiling crowd, a long train of specks racing along, weaving stitches in and out of the sky. Their movement was absolutely chaotic. They vanished, reappeared a few kilometres on, for the length of three hundred or so metres, and vanished again. I blinked, thinking my eyes were tricking me.

"It is Shifting between here and some other world," said the Vermiform, whose lower worms were increasingly questing about in the grass.

The hunt turned towards us in a curve; its trail receded into the distance. Closer, at its fore, individual dots resolved as jet-black horses and hounds. The horses were larger than the greatest destriers and between, around, in front of their flying hooves ran hounds bigger than wolves. Black manes and tails streamed and tattered, unnaturally long. The dogs' eyes burned, reflecting starlight, the horses' coats shone. There were countless animals – or what looked like animals – acting as one being, possessed of only one sense: to kill. Hooves scraped the air, claws raked as they flew. They reared like the froth on the wave, and behind them the arc of identical horses and hounds stretched in their wake.

They were shrieking like a myriad newborn babies. Dulled by distance it sounded almost plaintive. Closer, their size grew, their screaming swelled. As I stared at them, they changed. Yellow-white flickers showed here and there in the tight pack. All at different rates but quickly, their hides were rotting and peeling away. Some were already skeletons, empty ribs and bone legs. The hounds' slobbering mouths decayed to black void maws and sharp white teeth curving back to the ears. Above them, the horses transformed between articulated skeletons and full-fleshed beasts. Their skulls nodded on vertebral columns as they ran. Closer, their high, empty eyesockets drew me in. As I watched, the skeleton rebuilt to a stallion – rotten white eyes; glazed recently

dead eyes; aware and living eyes rolled to focus on us.

The horse's flanks dulled and festered; strips dropped off its forelegs and vanished. Bones galloped, then sinews appeared binding them, muscle plumped, veins sprang forth branching over them. Skin regrew; it was whole again, red-stained hooves gleaming. The hounds' tongues lolled, their ears flapped as they rushed through hissing displaced air. All cycled randomly from flesh to bone. Tails lashed like whips, the wind whistled through their rib cages, claws flexed on paw bones like dice. Then fur patched them over and the loose skin under their bellies again rippled in the slipstream. Horses' tails billowed. Their skulls' empty gaps between front and back teeth turned blindly in the air. The Gabbleratchet charged headlong.

I shouted, "They're rotting into skeletons and back!"

"We *said* they're not stable in time!"

"Fucking – what are they? What are they doing?"

"We wish we knew." The Vermiform sank down into the ground until just her head was visible, like a toadstool, and then only the top half of her head, her eyes turned up to the sky. Her worms were grubbing between the icy soil grains and leaving me. They kept talking, but their voices were fewer, so faint I could scarcely hear. "The Gabbleratchet was old before the first brick was laid in Epsilon, or Vista or even Hacilith; aeons ago when Rhydanne were human and Awian precursors could fly – "

"Stop! Please! I don't understand! You've seen it before, haven't you?"

"Our first glimpse of the Gabbleratchet was as long before the dawn of life on your world, as the dawn of life on your world is before the present moment."

Never dying, never tiring, gorged with bloodlust, chasing day and night. The Gabbleratchet surged on, faster than anything I had ever seen. "How do you think I can outrun that?"

"You can't. But you are more nimble; you must outmanoeuvre it."

I saw Cyan on one of the leading horses! She rode its broad back, decaying ribs. Her blonde hair tussled. Her fingers clutched the prongs of its vertebrae, her arms stiff. She looked sick and worn with terror

and exhilaration. I tried to focus on her horse; its withers were straps of dark pink muscle and its globe eyes set tight in pitted flesh. The hounds jumped and jostled each other running around its plunging hooves.

On the backs of many other horses rode skeletons human and non-human, and corpses of various ages. They were long dead of fear or hunger but still riding, held astride by their wind-dried hands. Some horses had many sets of finger-bones entwined in their manes; some carried arms bumping from tangled hands, but the rest of the body had fallen away. They had abducted hundreds over the millennia.

The Gabbleratchet arced straight above me and plunged down vertically. White flashes in the seething storm were the teeth of those in lead. The moonlight caught eyes and hooves in tiny pulses of reflection.

I had never seen anything fly vertically downward. It shouldn't be able to. It wasn't obeying any physical rules.

Cyan clung on. I wondered if she was still sane.

"Run!" shouted the Vermiform.

The Gabbleratchet's wild joy seized me. I wanted to chase and catch. I wanted the bursting pride of success, the thrill of killing! Their power transfixed me. I loved them! I hated them! I wanted to be one! I tasted blood in my mouth and I accepted it eagerly. My open smile became a snarl.

The dogs' muzzles salivated and their baying tongues curled. They were just above my head. I saw the undersides of the hooves striking down.

"Run!" screamed the Vermiform.

I jumped forward, sprinting at full pelt. The hunt's howling burst the air. Its gale blew my hair over my eyes and I glanced back, into the wind to clear it.

The lead beasts plunged into the ground behind me, and *through* it. The air and ground surface distorted out around them in a double ripple, as if it was gelatinous. The whole hunt trammelled straight down into the earth and forked sparks leapt up around it, crackling out among the grass. It was a solid crush of animal bodies and bone. I saw flashes of detail: fur between paw pads, dirty scapulae, suppurating viscera.

The corpses the horses were carrying hit the ground and stayed on top. They broke up, some fell to dust and the creatures following went through them too. Cyan's horse was next; it plunged headfirst into the earth, throwing her against the ground hard. She lay lifeless. The stampede of manes and buttocks continued through her. The column shrank; the last few plummeted at the ground and disappeared into it. Two final violet sparks sidewound across the plain, ceased. All was eerily quiet.

The Vermiform emerged beside me but its voices were awed. "It'll take a minute to turn around. Quick!"

I ran to the area the Gabbleratchet had passed through, expecting to see a dent in the frozen soil but not one of the grass blades had been bent; the only marks were my own footprints. The hairs on my arms stood up and the air smelt chemical, the same as when I once visited a peel tower that had been struck by lightning. There was no reek of corruption or animals, just the tang of spark-split air.

I turned Cyan over carefully. She had been flung against the ground at high speed – faster than I could fly – and I thought she was dead, but she was breathing.

"I can't see any broken bones. Not that it matters if that thing's driven her mad."

"Pick her up," said the Vermiform.

I did so and Cyan jolted awake, gasped, open-mouthed. "Jant? What are you doing here?"

"Just keep still." The Vermiform sprang up from under my feet and wrapped around us. More worms appeared, adding to the thread, beginning at my ankles then up to my waist, binding us tightly together.

Cyan waggled her head at the deserted tundra. She screamed, "Do you have to follow me everywhere? Even into my nightmares?"

The worms nearest her face grouped together into a hand and slapped her.

Cyan spluttered, "How dare – !"

The hand slapped her again, harder.

"Thanks," I said.

A horse burst from the ground, bent forelegs first. It pawed the grass

without touching it. Its enormous rear hooves paced apart. Long hair feathered over them; its fetlock bones swayed as it put its weight on them and reared.

Cyan wailed, "What does it want?"

Its fore hooves gouged the air, its long head turned from side to side. It couldn't understand what we were. It sensed us, with whatever senses it had, and it shrieked at us. It could not know its own power nor regulate its voice to our level. It gave us its full unearthly scream, right into my face.

The Vermiform tightened around my legs.

Its tongue curled, its jaw widened, it was bone; no tongue but the jaw dotted with holes for blood vessels and peaks for ligament connections. Its incisors clamped together, the veins appeared running into the bone, the muscles flowered and rotting horseflesh became a whole beast again. It turned its mad, rolling eye on me. Sparks crackled over us, tingling. Hounds and horses began springing up around us. No soil stuck to them; they had treated the earth as if it was another form of air.

The horse arched its neck. I looked up into the convoluted rolled cartilage in its nasal passages. Its jutting nose bones thrust towards me, its jaw wide to bite my face. Slab teeth in living gums came down –

– The Vermiform snatched us away –

Its coils withdrew and dropped me on a hard surface. I sat up and crowed like a cock, "Hoo-hoo! That was a neat move, Worm-fest!"

Beside me Cyan crawled and spat. I helped her up: "Are you all right?"

"Jant, what are you *doing* here?"

"I've come to rescue you."

"Rescue me? Sod off! What just happened? Did you see those horse things? …Argh! Worms! …What the fuck are these worms?"

"Allow me to introduce you to the Vermiform," I said. It was writhing around my feet in a shapeless mass. If it had been human, it would have been panting.

"We must keep going," it chorused.

Cyan said, "A horse was lying down and it seemed friendly. I climbed on its back. I didn't know *that* was going to happen… Oh, god, what *is* this place?"

A water drop landed on my head. Good question. I looked around and realised we were in a gigantic cavern, so vast I could not clearly see the other side.

The sound of a bustling market broke all around us. The stone walls rucked and soared up a hundred metres in the gloom, latticed with ledges from which bats dangled like plums. I gazed up to the roof, into vaults and rifts and wedding-cake tumbles of flowstone arching into darkness. The ceiling dazzled with circular gold and purple jewels. They were so lambent I was tempted to climb up and collect them until I realised they weren't gems embedded in the stone but water droplets hanging from it. They reflected the cool, blue light from the bulbous tails of Neon Bugs clinging to great trunks of suspended stalactites, bathing the whole chamber in their glow.

Market stalls were laid out in disorderly lines on the uneven floor, filling the cave, and up into a circular tunnel climbing slowly to the surface. Slake Cross town in all its entirety would fit into that passage. Stalls tangled along both sides of it like a thread of commerce linking the cave to Epsilon city's immense market a kilometre or more above us.

"It's Epsilon bazaar!" I said. I'd known it extended underground but I had always turned down invitations to visit. I envisaged a dirty crawl with my head caught and pressed between two planes of rock, my feathers wet and muddied, and my knees popped from kneeling on stony nubs in a stinking stream passage all the way. But this was wonderful!

At the distant end of the tunnel its entrance shone with white sunlight like a disc. Shafts of light angled in, picking out a faint haze in the air. Reflections arced the tunnel walls, showing their smooth and even bore.

I began, "Well, Cyan, this –"

The Vermiform seethed urgently. "Explain when we have more time! The Gabbleratchet could be here any second!"

"What?"

"It could be chasing us. If it can still sense us, it will pursue us."

Cyan said, "This is weird. In dreams you're not normally able to choose what you say." She crawled to her feet and wandered off between the stalls.

The Vermiform heaved limply, "Come back!"

She was looking at the gley men browsing in the aisles. Gley men are completely blind, just a plate of smooth bone where their eyes should be. They feel their way with very long, thin fingers like antennae, touching, touching, searching. They are naked and hairless with milky, translucent, waterproof skin; but underneath it is another skin covered with thick fur, to keep them warm in the deep abyss. You can see through their upper skin to the fur layer pressing and wiping against it.

Cyan didn't seem as repelled by them as I was. She seemed entranced. One of them, by a refreshment stand, was picking cave ferns off the wall and putting them in sandwiches. He had beer bottles, brown and frothy, labelled "sump water." He sold white mousse made from the twiggy foam that clings to the roofs of flooded passages. He had boxes of immature stalagmite bumps that looked like fried eggs, breccia cake, talus cones, and crunchy tufa toffee.

Cyan paused at a jewellery stall and examined the cave pearls for sale. She put on a necklace made from broken straw stalactites and looked at her reflection in the mirror-polished shell of a moleusk – one of the metre-long shellfish that burrow far underground.

Cyan didn't know that, as a visitor to the Shift, she could project herself as any image she wanted, so she appeared the way she imagined herself. Like most female Shift tourists her self-image was nothing like her real body. She was a bit taller, more muscular and plumper, and she wore casual clothes. She looked like a young, unattached fyrd recruit spending her day off in any Hacilith bar. She was slightly less pretty here than in the Fourlands; I suppose that meant she lacked confidence in her looks.

For once, I couldn't alter my appearance. I was here in the body and I planned to take it home intact.

*

Some stalls sold stencils and crayons for cave paintings. Some displayed everyday objects that "petrifying water" had turned into stone. Mice with three legs (called trice) ran under the rows and cats very good at catching trice (called trousers) ran after them.

Neon Bugs illuminated beautiful constructions of silk. Replete Spiders hung from the ceiling on spindly, hairless legs, their huge, round abdomens full of treacly slime. It dripped, now and then, on the awnings of the stalls and the tops of our heads. The noisome things lived suspended all the time, and other bugs and centipedes as long as my arm swarmed over the cave walls to bring them morsels and feed them in return for the taste of the sweet gunge they exuded.

The smell of wet pebbles rose from the cavern floor, which descended in a series of dented ripplestone steps to a pool so neatly circular it looked like a hand basin. A waterfall cascaded down a slippery chute, gushing into it. Its roar echoed to us across the immense chamber as a quiet susurration.

Naked gley children were sliding down the chute and splashing into the water where Living Fossil fish swam; the play of their luminous eyes lit up the pool. It was screened by thick, lumpy tallow-yellow stalactites so long they reached the ground and were creeping out over it like wax over a candleholder. Between them chambers and passages led off, descending in different directions into the depths. Most were natural but some were like mine shafts, with timber props and iron rails.

Tortuoise with huge shells crawled frustratingly slowly up and down between the stalls, towing baskets on wheels. There were Silvans, child-shaped shadows who live only in the shade of cave mouths and tree-throws in the forest. At the furthest end of the cavern, where the subterranean denizens who prefer to stay away from the light shop and sell their wares, hibernating Cave Elephants had worn hollows in the velvet sediment.

"Call her back!" the Vermiform chorused. "The Gabbleratchet could be here any second!"

I glanced at the cave mouth.

The Vermiform said, "It doesn't need an entrance. It can go anywhere! It can go places you can't, where the atmosphere is poisonous:

hydrogen, phosphorus, baked beans. You saw that solid rock is nothing to it. It can run straight through a planet without noticing."

A big, lumpen Vadose was standing by a stall. Cyan realised that the man was made of clay. She sank her fingers into its thigh, pulled out a handful and started moulding it into a ball. The Vadose turned round, "Excuse me, would you return that, please?"

"It's my dream and I can do what I want!"

"Dream?" articulated the Vadose. "I assure you, poppet, this is no oneiric episode."

The ball of clay in Cyan's hands puffed up into a tiny version of the Vadose – it tittered and waved at her. She yelped and dropped it. It ran on little feet to one of the Vadose's thick legs and merged smoothly with it. Cyan slapped its round belly, leaving a palm imprint.

The Vadose cried out bashfully and caught the attention of a Doggerel guard stalking past. It was a big bloodhound, bipedal on its hock-kneed back legs, wearing a constable's coat and the helmet of a market guard, black with a gold spike on top. The chin strap was lost in its drooping jowls. It rhymed:

"Shall I remove this silly lass
Who seems to be doing no sort of good?
In fact, you seem in some impasse."

The Vadose said, "Yes, if you would."

It placed its paw on Cyan's shoulder but she wasn't perturbed. She gave it a kick. Its hackles raised; it picked her up, tucked her under one arm and carried her to us. It set Cyan down in front of me:

"Here is your rowdy friend,
Please keep her close.
Otherwise she may offend
One more dangerous than Vadose."

"Thanks," I said.

"Talk in rhyme
All the time," insisted the Doggerel.

"First we are chased, then we are irritated," complained the Vermiform.

"No, wait," I said. "I can do it… Thanks for being so lenient
For my friend is no deviant
She's a tourist here for the first time
From now on she'll behave just fine."

The Doggerel sniggered. "Only a tourist and she looks so boring?
I'll leave in case she has me snoring." It strode away with dignity, sturdy tail waving.

Cyan said, "If this is a jook dream I'm going to do it all the time." She set off towards the pool but the Vermiform snared her round the waist. She beat her fists at the worms reeling her in. "Hey! Get off me!"

A small black puppy was trailing her. When she stopped, it sat down on its haunches and looked at her intently. It had pointed ears and alert, intelligent eyes. "It's following me," she said. "It's cute. Makes a change from everything else in here."

"It's just a Yirn Hound," the Vermiform said dismissively and pushed it out of the way. It took a couple of steps to the side, resumed staring at Cyan.

"Can I pick it up?" she asked, and as she was speaking another dog padded towards her from under the nearest stall. It sat down and regarded her. She looked puzzled. Another two followed it, clustered close and stared up plaintively. Three more materialised from behind the corner of the next row and joined them.

The Vermiform's surface rippled in a sigh. "They're desire made manifest. For every want or desire that a young woman has, a Yirn Hound pops into existence. If you stay in this world you won't be able to get rid of them. They will follow you around forever, watching you. Most girls grow accustomed to them, but otherwise Yirn Hounds drive them mad, because until you grow old they'll do nothing but stare at you. You could kill them, but more will appear to fill the space."

At least twenty little terriers had arrived while the Vermiform was talking. They sat in a rough circle around Cyan's feet and continued to regard her.

"Well, I like them," she said, bent down to the nearest one and caressed its ears. It allowed itself to be stroked and waggled its head

with pleasure. Their crowd thickened, but I couldn't tell where they were coming from – just trotting in from nowhere and taking their places at the edge of the pack.

Their inevitable steady increase repulsed me. I said, "God, girl, you have a lot of wants."

"Compared to you? I bet you'd be buried in a pile by now!"

Sparks began to crackle in the tunnels at the far end. I caught a glimpse of the Gabbleratchet thundering in their depths. It more than filled every passage and morphing beasts charged half-in, half-out of the bedrock. Their backs and the tops of their ears projected from the floors: for them, the rock didn't exist. Skeleton horses, rotting horses, horses glowing with rude health reached the tunnel mouths. Paws and pasterns projected from the wall – they burst out! The front of the screeching column came down the cavern in a red and black wave.

"The 'Ratchet!"

I couldn't look away. Their screaming was so deafening Cyan and I clamped our hands to our ears. They tore everybody in their path to shreds – obliterated the Neon Bugs on the walls as they passed, and the lights went out.

The Vermiform wrenched us backwards –

– Bright sunlight burst upon us. I squeezed my eyes shut, blinked, and tasted clean, fresh air. A warm breeze buffed my skin… We were on a beach. Cyan cried out, disorientated.

"Precambria!" said the Vermiform. We tumbled out of its grasp onto the yielding sand.

"Thanks," I said. "Good Shift."

"The Gabbleratchet *is* chasing us!" It quivered. "We doubt we have thrown it off. We will take you on again." It pooled down around us, its worms moving fitfully, trying to summon up the energy.

A barren spit curved away into the distance. The aquamarine sea washed on the outside edge, moulding the compact sand into corrugations. Low, green stromatolite mounds made a marsh all along its inside. Behind us, on an expanse of featureless dunes, nothing grew at all. I looked down the spit, out to sea.

A splashing started within its curve. The water began to froth as if it was boiling. Creatures like lobsters were jumping out and falling back, lobes along their sides flapping. They had huge black eyes like doorknobs. One flipped up, and in an instant I saw ranked gills and an iris-diaphragm mouth whisk open and gnash shut.

Hundreds of crab-things scuttled out of the water's edge; their pointed feet stepping from under blue-grey shells with arthropod finesse. There were long, spiny worms too, undulating on seven pairs of tentacle-legs.

"Something's chasing them," said the Vermiform. "Oh no. No! *It's* here already!"

The patch of frothing water surged closer. Cyan and I stared but the Vermiform started knitting itself around us frantically. Different parts of it were gabbling different things at once: "Eat the damn trilobites – hallucigenia – eat the anomalocaris – but LEAVE US ALONE!"

Straight out of the froth the Gabbleratchet rose, without disturbing the water's surface by so much as a ripple. Dry hooves flying, the stream of hunters arced up against the sun. Red eyes and empty sockets turned to us –

– Endless salt flats. The vast ruins of a city stood on the horizon, its precarious tower blocks and sand-choked streets little more than rearing rock formations in the crusted desert that was once the ocean bed.

"I've been here before," I said. "It's Vista."

"What's that in the distance?" Cyan said, pointing at a bright flash.

"Probably a Bacchante tribe."

"They're coming closer."

"They doubtless want to know what the fuck we are."

After Vista Marchan fell to the Insects, its society transformed again and again and eventually collapsed completely. At first the people inhabited the city's ruins, but little by little they left in search of food, surviving as nomads in the desert. Bacchante tribes are either all male or all female and they meet together only once a year in a great festivity. The desert can't sustain them and their numbers are dwindling, but they roam in and out of Epsilon over the great Insect bridge to survive.

I remembered the only Bacchante I had met. "Is Mimosa still fighting the Insects?"

"Yes, with Dunlin," the Vermiform concurred.

"King Dunlin," I said.

The Vermiform produced its woman's head, and shook it.

"No. Just Dunlin. He has renounced being king. He now presents himself as simply a travelling wise man. He advises many worlds in their struggle against the Insects."

"Oh."

"It seems to be a phase he's going through. He is growing very sagacious, but he hasn't yet realised the true extent of his power."

"Their horses are *shiny,"* said Cyan.

The Bacchantes galloped closer. The four polished legs of each mount flickered, moving much faster than destriers with a chillingly smooth movement and no noise but a distant hum.

"They're horse-shaped machines," I said. "They don't have real heads, and no tails at all. They're made of metal."

"They're made of solar panels," the Vermiform corrected.

High over the ruined city, the Gabbleratchet burst through.

The Bacchantes halted in confusion. The black hunters were so much worse against the bright sky. They cast no shadow. Dull, cream-yellow jaws gaped, sewn with white molars. The Bacchantes stared, hypnotised.

The Vermiform screamed at the riders, "Run!"

The Gabbleratchet plunged down and –

– Splash! Splash!

Freezing muddy water swirled up around me. I sank in a chaos of bubbles. Something tugged me and I broke the surface, spluttering. Up came Cyan, and the Vermiform held us above the water of a stinking, misty swamp. Gas was bubbling up from clumps of algae.

The sky was monochrome grey, filled with cloud and a hazy halo where the sun was trying to break through.

"Infusoria Swamp."

Cyan wiped slime off her face and hair. "Hey! This is my dream and I want to go somewhere nice!"

"Shut up!" The Vermiform seethed in fury. "All for you, little girl! We don't see why we have to do this and now we're being chased! We don't know how to get rid of it. We don't know where to go next that won't kill you!"

She shrieked in frustration, grabbed handfuls of worms and tried to squash them but they forced her fists open and crawled out.

"Shifting is sapping our strength," said the worms.

"Come on!" I shouted at it. "Let's go."

"It's my dream so get off me!"

"Stop squeezing us."

"Piss off and keep pissing off, piss-worms!"

A colossal blob of gel creature flowed towards us on the water's surface. Flecks and granules churned inside it as if it was a denser portion of the swamp; it extended pseudopodia and started to wrap around the outlying worms.

"What's that?" said Cyan.

"Amoeba." The Vermiform pulled its worms out and hoisted us up higher with a sucking noise.

"Isn't it rather large?"

"We're very small here."

"Look at the sky!" said Cyan.

The bright patch was growing in size. Violet forks of lightning cracked the sky in two, leapt to the swamp, hissed and jumped between the reeds. The Gabbleratchet arced out.

The Vermiform gave one completely inhuman scream with all its strength and jerked us out –

– A hot plain with cycads and a volcano on the horizon. Giant lizards were stalking, two-legged, across it towards a huge empty sea urchin shell with a sign saying "The Echinodome – Sauria's Best Bar."

A flash of green on the scorched sands before us. The Gabbleratchet burst towards –

*

– Cyan screamed and we both fell onto a cold floor, knocking the breath out of us. We were in an enclosed space; we Shifted so fast my eyes didn't have time to focus.

The Vermiform parted from us in one great curtain. Its exhausted worms crawled around with Sauria sand and Infusoria gel trickling from between them. I stamped my feet, feeling water squeeze out of my boot lacings.

"We must have thrown it by now," the worms moaned. "We must have… We think so…"

Cyan and I looked up and down the corridor. It was unpainted metal and very dull. "That's more steel than a whole fyrd of lancers."

The Vermiform started sending thin runners around the curve of the corridor. "We're above Plennish," it said.

"Wow," said Cyan. "What an imagination I have."

I found a tiny, steel-framed window. I stood on tiptoe and tried to peer through the thick glass. "It must be night time. Look at all the stars." There certainly were an awful lot of stars out there, filling the whole sky and – the ground! "Cyan, look at this – there's no ground! There's nothing under us but stars!" I looked up, "Oh… wow…"

"Let me see," she said.

I refused to let her take my place at the little window. I pressed my face to the glass, gazing intently. "The grey moon fills the whole sky!"

"It isn't a moon." said the Vermiform. "It's Plennish. It's grey because it's completely covered in Insect paper."

"Ah… shit… All that is Paperlands?"

"Yes." It sighed. "The Freezers once tried to bomb it. Now radioactive Insects come from there to infest many other worlds."

"I'd like to fly around outside. There's so much space." I looked down again – or up – to the stars. A little one was racing along in relation to the rest, travelling smoothly towards us. It was so faint it was difficult to see. I said, "A star is moving. It's coming closer fast. Shift us out of here."

A shiver of apprehension flowed over the Vermiform. "We can't keep going. We're exhausted."

"You have to!"

'We can't… We can't! Anyway, this is a refuelling dock. If any ship tries to land without the protocol the Triskele Corporation will blow it to cinders."

I glanced out the window, and saw them from above. Horse skulls like beaks, pinched withers falling to bone. Their long backs carried no corpses now. Sparks crawled around them, flicked up to the window glass; they ploughed straight into and through the metal wall.

"It's the Gabbleratchet!"

Human screams broke out directly underneath us. The Vermiform threw a net of worms around Cyan and myself. Sparks crackled out of the floor beside us. The muzzle of a hound appeared –

– Air rushed up around me. I was falling. I turned over, once, and the black bulk of the ground swung up into the sky. The air was very thin, hard to breathe. I fell faster, faster every second.

I forced open my wings, brought them up and buffered as hard as possible against the rushing air. I slowed down instantly, swung out in a curve and suddenly I was flying forwards. I rocketed over the dark landscape. Where was I? And why the fuck had the Vermiform dropped me in the air?

And where was Cyan? Had it separated us? I looked down and searched for her – saw a tiny speck plummeting far below me, shrinking with distance. I folded my wings back, beat hard and dived. She was falling as fast as I could fly. She was spinning head over arse, so all I could see was a tangle of arms and legs, with a flash of white panties every two seconds and nowhere to grab hold of her.

"Stretch out!" I yelled. "Stretch your arms out!"

No answer – she was semiconscious. She wouldn't be able to breathe at this altitude. I reached out and grabbed her arm. The speed she was falling dragged it away from me.

She rotated again and I seized a handful of her jumper. I started flapping twice the speed, panting and cursing, the strain in my back and my wings too much. Too much! We were still falling, but slower. My wings shuddered with every great desperate sweep down – and when I raised them for the next beat, we started falling at full speed again.

"Can't you lift her?" said a surprised voice, faint in the slipstream. A wide scarf wafted in front of my face, its ends streaming up above me in the airflow. It was the Vermiform: it had knitted some worms around my neck!

"Of course I can't!" I yelled. "I can barely hold my own weight!"

"Oh."

The scarf began spinning around us, binding us together. More worms appeared and its bulk thickened, sheltering Cyan but her head bobbled against my chest.

We fell for so long we reached a steady speed. I half-closed my eyes, trying to see what sort of land was below us. I could barely distinguish between the ground and the scarcely-fainter sky. There were miniscule stars and, low against the far horizon, two sallow moons glossed the tilting flat mountaintops of a mesa landscape with a pallid light.

The ends of the scarf swept in front of my face as they searched the ground. "I'll lower you."

It shot out a thick tentacle towards the table-topped mountain. The tentacle dived faster than we were falling, worms unspooling from us and adding to it. It reached the crunchy rubble and anchored there. We slowed; the wind ceased. It began lowering us smoothly, millions of individual worms drawing over each other and taking the strain. They coiled in a pile on the ground. We came to the ground gently on top of them and toppled over in a heap.

The Vermiform uncoiled and stood us on the very edge of an escarpment that fell away sheer below us to a level lake. Other plateaux cut the clear night sky. In places, their edges had eroded and slipped down into stepped, crumbling cliffs. Deep gorges carved dry and lifeless valleys between them. They gave onto a vast plain cracked across with sheer-sided canyons. The bottom of each, if they had floors at all, were as far below the surface as we were above it.

A series of lakes were so still, without any ripples, they looked heavy and ominous, somehow fake. It was difficult to believe they were water at all, but the stars reflected in their murky depths. The landscape looked as if it was nothing but a thin black sheet punched out with hollow-

sided mountains, with great rents torn in it, through which I was looking to starry space beneath. There were no plants, no buildings; the grit lay evenly untouched by any wind.

The Vermiform threw out expansive tendrils. "How do you like our own world?"

"Is this the Somatopolis?" I said. "It's empty."

"It is long dead. We were the Somatopolis, when we lived here. Once our flesh city was the whole world. We covered it up to twice the height of these mountains. We filled those chasms. Now it's bare. We are all that is left of the Somatopolis."

The pinkish-white moonlight shone on the desolate escarpments. I imagined the whole landscape covered in nothing but worms, kilometres deep. Their surface constantly writhed, filled and reformed. I imagined them sending up meshed towers topped with high parapets loosely tangled together. Their bulk would pull out from continents into isthmuses, into islands; then contract back together, throwing up entire annelid mountain ranges. Caverns would yawn deep in the mass as worms separated, dripping worm stalactites, then would close up again with the horribly meaty pressure of their weight.

"Let's go," I said. "The Gabbleratchet will appear any second."

"Wait until it does," said the Vermiform. "We are bringing it here deliberately. We have an idea."

"The air's so stale," said Cyan.

"It is used up. The Insects took our world."

I said, "Look, Cyan; this is what happens to a world that loses against the Insects."

The Vermiform raised a tentacle that transformed into a hand, pointing to a plain of familiar grey roofs – the beginning of the Insects' Paperlands. Their raised front arced towards us like a stationary tidal wave and their full extent was lost to view over the unnervingly distant horizon. The paper buildings were cracked and weathered – they were extremely old. They were darker in colour than the Paperlands in our world, but patched with pale regions where Insects had reworked them hundreds of times.

"They bring in material from other places to build with," said the Vermiform. "There is nothing left for them to use on my entire planet."

As we grew accustomed to the distance, we began to distinguish them: tiny specks scurrying over the plain, around the lakes and along the summits. It was like looking down into an enormous ant's nest. I stared, forgetting this was a whole world, and imagined the mountains as tiny undulations in the soil and the Insects the size of ants, busy among them. There were single Insects, groups of a few or crowds of several thousands, questing over the grit from which everything organic had been leached. They swarmed in and out of their hooded tunnels.

The Paperlands bulged up in one or two places and paper bridges emerged, rose up and vanished at their apex. In other places the continuous surface of the paper roofs sank into deep pits with enormous tunnel openings; places where Insects had found ways through to other worlds. They were carrying food through – a bizarre variety of pieces of plants and animals: legosaurs, Brick Bats, humans, marzipalms. Countless millions bustled down there, pausing to stroke antennae together or layering spit onto the edges of the Paperlands with an endless industry and a contented mien. Their sheer numbers dumbfounded and depressed me. I said, "We'll never be able to beat them."

"We could have defeated them," the Vermiform choired. "We were winning our war. We fought them for hundreds of years. We forced inside their shells, we wrapped around their legs and pulled them apart. We even brought parasites and diseases in from other worlds and infected them, but the Insects chewed the mites off each other and evolved immunity to the diseases, as they eventually do in all the worlds of their range."

"They're tough," I said.

"They become so, over many worlds, yes. We turned the battle when lack of air started to slow them down. We gained ground. We forced them back to their original tunnel and they built a final wall. One more strike and we could have driven them through and sealed their route. But then Vista's world collapsed and its colossal ocean drained through. See those lakes? It was their larvae that did for us."

"Their young?" I asked.

"Once the Insects started to breed in their millions. Their growing larvae are far more ravenous than adults. They scooped up mandibles-full of worms and ate the city."

Cyan shrieked, "Look out! There's one coming!"

Twirling antennae appeared over the escarpment edge and an Insect charged towards us. Cyan and I turned to run but the Vermiform shot out two tentacles and grabbed the Insect around its thorax, jerking it to a halt.

The tentacles snaked around the Insect, forced its mandibles wide – then its serrated mouthparts. The Insect ducked its head and tried to back off, but a third stream of worms began to pour into the Insect's mouth, keeping the mandibles open all the time. Worms streamed up from the ground and vanished down its throat.

The rest of the Vermiform still pooled at our feet waited. For a couple of seconds, nothing happened. Then the Insect exploded. Its carapace burst open and flew apart. Its innards splattered against us. Its plates fell in a metre radius leaving six legs and a head lying with a huge knot of worms in the middle where its body had been. They moved like a monstrous ball of string, covered in haemolymph, and reformed into the beautiful woman. The worms of her face moved into a smile, "We love doing that. Wish they would line up so we can burst them one by one."

"Ugh," said Cyan.

I said to her, "Keep watching for more Insects."

Cyan said, "I hate this place. I want to go. I want to see the cave."

"The market was destroyed."

"No. This is my dream and I say it wasn't. Take me back; there are too many bugs here."

"Why do you think I dropped you in the air?" the Vermiform said bitterly.

It was easier to speak to the worm-woman than the amorphous bunch of annelids. I asked her, "What has the collapse of Vista got to do with you losing the war? Did Vista's sea drown you, or something?"

"It drowned billions of us." She pointed down to the lake. "The Somatopolis was dry before that, very hot and arid. That is how we like it; in

fact we brought you here during the night because otherwise the sun would roast you. The waterspout surged from an Insect tunnel beneath us and forced out between us. It erupted a kilometre high and Vista's whole ocean thundered out. We fled – how could we cope with running water? Still, it was salt water and we might have survived… But the ocean began to evaporate, clouds began to form and, for the first time ever in the Somatopolis, we had rain."

The worm-woman indicated the pools. "Freshwater lakes formed deep among us. We recoiled from the water and erroneously left it open to the air. And the Insects began to breed. We tried to stop them. We kept fighting but, as our numbers diminished, we found it harder to cover the ground. Generations after generations of larvae decimated us, so we sought shelter under the surface. From there we Shifted to find a new world to colonise… as many worlds as possible from the construction of the Insect's nest."

The Vermiform woman dissolved into a snake and slithered to rejoin the main mass. "We hope the Gabbleratchet might destroy some Insects," it added. "Brace yourselves. We will try to shake it once and for all by retracing our steps."

We looked around for the Gabbleratchet, in the cloudless sky, against the rounds of the moons, among the peaks of the Paperlands and directly down to the lake beneath us.

I thought I saw something moving in it! I blinked and stared. Something was swimming in its murky abyss. It became darker and clearer as it rose close to the surface. It moved with a quick straight jet, then turned head over tail along its length and disappeared into the depths.

"What the fuck? What was that?"

A flash of green on the sheer rock face below us. The Gabbleratchet hurtled straight out of it. Empty white pelvic girdles and scooping paws reflected in the lake.

Cyan screamed. The Gabbleratchet turned; it knew where we were.

"Now!" The Vermiform lifted us off our feet, through –

– Plennish –

– Infusoria Swamp –

– Sauria –
– Precambria –
– Epsilon Market –
– Somewhere dark…?

Somewhere dark! Cyan cried, "Are you there?"

"I'm here, I'm here!" I felt for her hand. I opened my eyes wide, just to be sure, but there was not one shred of light. Then, seemingly in a vast remoteness I saw a faint glow, a thin vertical white beam seemed to… *walk* past us. It stopped, turned around and began to hurry back again with the motion of a human being, though it was nothing but a single line.

"Where are we?" I demanded. "You said we were going back to the Fourlands!"

"Stupid creature! This *is* your world. We want to hide for a while in case the Gabbleratchet comes."

"But…"

The Vermiform said, "This is Rayne's room. That is Rayne."

I think the Vermiform was pointing but I couldn't see anything.

"She is pacing back and forth. She's anxious; in fact, she's panicking. Can't you feel it?"

Curiously enough, I could. The intense emotions were radiating from the white ray and putting me on edge. "But what's happened to her? That's just a thin line!"

"Hush. If we see the Gabbleratchet's sparks, we will have to leave fast. This is the Fourlands, the fifth to the eighth dimensions. You occupy those as well as the ones you're familiar with, seeing as you've evolved in a world with ten. You can't see them with your usual senses, but you do operate in them. We are amazed that you never consciously realise it."

Close by, Cyan shouted, "It's talking crap! Tell it so, Jant."

"Hey, it's interesting."

The Vermiform harped on, "Emotions impress on the fifth dimension, which is why you can sometimes sense a strong emotion or see an image of the person who suffered it, in the same place years later. What

other examples can we give? Acupuncture works on the part of you that operates in the sixth dimension, which is why you'll never be able to understand how it works with the senses you have. And the seventh, if only you knew of that one – "

Cyan screamed, "Take me home! Take me home *now!* Now! Now! Now!" I could hear her thrashing and kicking at the flaccid worms.

"Think of it as a shadow world," I told her.

"You goatfucking son of a bastard's bastard's bastard!"

We waited for a long time. The Vermiform eventually said. "I think we've thrown off the Gabbleratchet. Let's go."

It gave us a small jolt and our worm-bonds dropped to the floor. Off-balance I stumbled forward – into Rayne's bedroom.

The Gutter Sees the Light That Never Shines

ALISTAIR RENNIE

THE GUTTER MOVES AMONG MEN like the waft of a deadly chemical that has assembled itself in human form. He stinks primarily of brine. But there are other smells that fortify his breath; and his body, too, reeks powerfully of dreadful odours.

There is no telling the liquids with which he has soiled himself, but the oddity of their collective hue on the front of his smock is as ominous as it is filthy. Yet it is more than repulsion that causes people to maintain their distance. His face is a living image of nastiness, with a perpetual scowl that could easily be mistaken for a deformity. And there is a hunger in his eyes – more feral than human – that betrays an insatiable need for satisfactions that lie far beyond the tastes of ordinary men.

The Gutter walks the streets of the City of Thrills, the second city of the Republic of Noth. On his back he wears some kind of apparatus: a leathern harness holding what looks like a milk churn. A thick, heavy slosh accompanies his steps, the sound of something fleshy and fetid. On more than one occasion a City Arbiter, tapping a studded cosh on the side of his leg, has thought about stopping the Gutter and investigating the contents of the churn. But the stench of the Gutter has convinced him otherwise.

The Gutter is aware of this, which is one of the reasons why he allows himself to smell so badly. The violence of his aroma is an excellent deterrent against the curiosities of linear men.

The City of Thrills is an aborted geometry of narrow streets, decaying arcades and dim-lit porticos. A shambles of buildings lean simulta-

neously in all directions. The mangled brickwork and shoddy masonry interact as if by accident rather than design. Depictions of naked revellers, cosmic symbols and chimerical beasts adorn the lower portions of each edifice, adding an unexpected life and colour to the amplitude of disrepair. It is the custom of artists that inhabit the city to embellish its walls with expressions of beauty over uttermost states of dereliction.

The walkways under the porticos are abuzz with wineries and debating chambers, artists' missions and fetish clubs, drinking studios and pleasure galleries. There are few establishments equipped for catering for practical needs. Artisans and ironmongers are outnumbered by craftsmen working with soft metals and precious stones. Butchers and bakers are diminished by gastronomic deviants capable of producing absurdly delicate pastries and marinated meats. An illustrious drapery of precious cloths hangs ragged over the entrances of the numerous guilds.

And the Gutter fucking despises the place.

He passes through one district to another, of which there are three: the Carnal District, the Cymbeline District, and the Cerebral District. The Gutter is on the edge of the Carnal District. He passes several girls attired in reptilian sex-suits whose hair is braided with live snakes. When he passes them, even the snakes recoil at the sudden blast of the stench he bears.

It makes him smile: and, when he smiles, you can see how he has removed his teeth with a set of tongs for the purposes of sucking up his foodstuffs with greater efficiency.

But now the Gutter is growing restless, his glances darting like sparks from his eyes, and his gums chaffing with slavers on his lips. He is looking for a particular door with a particular sign carved upon its lintel, but not so visibly as anyone might see.

Within two or three hours of conducting his search, he discovers the sign – a cleft circle – over a heavy door made of parched oak. It is the sign of the Information Syndicate. The Information Syndicate have offices throughout the entire continent, but finding them isn't so easy. It is often said that the whereabouts of the Information Syndicate is their most precious commodity. But, if and when you find them, they

will sell you information at a price that is equal to the value of whatever it is you wish to know.

But the Gutter doesn't think he'll have to pay, because the Gutter doesn't have any money. He does, however, have a currency that serves him better.

The Gutting Knife.

The Sisters of No Mercy were up against a dangerous adversary.

Whorefrost.

Whorefrost was utterly reviled by female Meta-Warriors because of the extreme nature of his preferred method of killing them.

He had a pale, bloodless physique that looked like gelatine rather than flesh. His skin was smooth and greasy and largely hairless. His arms and belly seemed to consist more of muscle than fat only by the slightest of margins. He was big but not ungainly, with a huge mouth, thick-set lips and heavy jowls that swung pendulously as he walked.

Whorefrost's movements were deliberate and glacial. His preferred method of killing was exactly the same. First, he would try to disable his enemies by shattering their kneecaps, breaking their arms or stunning them with a carefully measured blow to the head. His Weapon of Choice was suitably designed for this approach: a heavy metallic baton forged in the shape of a gigantic penis. His aim was to keep his enemies alive for as long as it took to satisfy the requirements of his bodily ritual.

And this was the part that female Meta-Warriors reviled the most.

Death comes in many guises, some of which are more desirable than others. Death by Whorefrost is perhaps the most undesirable of all.

Should all things go according to plan, Whorefrost's enemy will be lying in a stupor of helplessness before him. It may be necessary to make them even more helpless than they already are, but this is a formality. As long as they're not *too* helpless, Whorefrost is happy.

And happier, still, when he begins to remove their clothing, which he does with a ponderous delicacy that ensures the maximum arousal of his vital parts, which are by no means a source of arousal for his victims.

Whorefrost's cock is long and thin with a remarkably bulbous head that makes it look like a bauble on the end of a stick. His testicles are

disproportionately huge and, like the rest of his body, hairless. More to the point, his egg-sac is teeming with semen that has an unusual potency: it is deadly cold and, to this extent, is biologically devastating.

Whorefrost's sperm is as thick as pus. It is also capable of causing the spread of frostbite within seconds which, when it spreads, causes a slow and insidious destruction of the body, from inside out, that lasts a matter of minutes or even hours.

Extreme cold burns like fire.

When he has dumped his seed in his enemy's nook, she feels a sudden numbness that, by gradual stages, begins to burn. The numbness is like a chill of ice which rapidly diffuses with the forcefulness and feel of acid. The acid sensation quickly grips the womb and begins to spread throughout the internal organs – the bowels, the guts, the spleen, the stomach, the kidneys and so on. The insides begin to boil, then become gangrenous and begin to rot. A further stage of numbness may occur, but only after a lengthy period of emphatic suffering that no other pain in the world can equal.

Which is why Whorefrost is especially reviled by female Meta-Warriors. But which is also why he is *more* reviled by their male counterparts.

An anal ravaging is bad enough at the best of times. But when Whorefrost is doing the buggering, the degeneration of the anal cavity, followed by the deterioration of everything else, is not a thing to be taken lightly.

It is apparent, then, that the Sisters of No Mercy were up against a dangerous adversary.

And the only comforting thought about it was…

So was he.

The stairwell was in darkness. It smelt of damp plaster, mildew and dry rot. The stairs curled upwards in a crooked spiral. Sometimes they sagged. Sometimes they stiffened. Sometimes they increased their steepness. Sometimes they almost flattened out. Sometimes they seemed so brittle that they would break. But they didn't. There were no landings, no doors, except at the top.

The room at the top of the stairs was a room of shadows. Two men lay on either side of the doorposts, their limbs twisted, their bodies soaked in blood around the chest, midriff and thighs.

They had died quickly. Too quickly. Their cries had been silenced before they could summon the breath to make them. Two broad cuts across their throats had silenced them forever.

These men had been assistants to the Information Master. Their true purpose in life, however, was to act as his protectors.

Clearly, they had failed.

The Gutter had the Information Master by the throat, the Gutting Knife poised against his belly.

"Rest assured," he said, "that you *will* speak." He cocked his head. "Unless, of course, you prefer to be gutted."

The Information Master wheezed because the Gutter was gripping his throat too tight. The Gutter slackened his grip.

"Speak," he said. "Or…" He applied a miniscule amount of pressure on the Gutting Knife.

It was enough.

This time, the Information Master didn't refuse to tell the Gutter everything he needed to know – about the Psychomatics, about where he must go to find them, and about where he might go to finish them off.

"So this is the fucker who likes to fuck all the other fuckers," said Little Sister.

"Looks like he's fucked himself with a fucking claw hammer." Big Sister scowled like her mouth was full of sour milk. "His face shows years of experience of being ugly."

Whorefrost smiled, and it was, as Big Sister had said, a truly awful sight.

"I will take great pleasure in dipping my oar in your waters," he said, rubbing his baton against his groin to emphasise the point.

"The only thing that'll be getting dipped is our blades in your blood."

Little Sister drew her long sword. Big Sister drew her short sword.

Whorefrost unstrung his greatcoat made of wild heifer and threw it behind him. He was bare-chested, his torso glistening like a chunk of lard. His tight pantaloons showed the full measure of his excitement. It was big.

"Pretty soon," snarled Little Sister, "we'll be ramming that cock of yours down your own fucking throat."

"Oh," said Whorefrost, "I think that me and my cock'll be doing the ramming." His huge mouth formed a broad, lascivious sneer. He raised the baton, rubbing it between his forefinger and thumb, and took a step forward.

Little Sister spat an unintelligible curse. Big Sister slapped the flat of her blade against her palm and positioned herself in a crouch.

No wonder Whorefrost was aroused. The Sisters of No Mercy were an impressive pair who did little, clothes-wise, to conceal the fact. Little Sister was short and extremely curvaceous, her thick arms and solid thighs betraying an immensely powerful strength in one so small. Big Sister was sinuous and agile, her flat breasts taut and masculine alongside Little Sister's sumptuous orbs. But anyone with any pretensions of fucking them was asking for trouble. The only people the Sisters had sex with was each other, and anyone who tried to prove otherwise would pay a very heavy and painful price.

Except for Whorefrost.

As far as he was concerned, their cunts were his.

Once, they had been three, clutching each other as they slept. In the recollections of their dreams, they would walk again in the Forest of Sores, hand in hand through trees as thick and closely knit as they were.

But these trees were of no ordinary caste; nor were they the product of the functions of Nature as they are normally perceived through linear means of scientific enquiry.

The trees of the Forest of Sores were a corruption of the basic elements of form – with whips and flails instead of branches, razor-wire instead of leaves, and shards of glass instead of blossoms.

Corruption, however, is of itself a consequence of Nature.

And so it was with the Sisters. With every step they took, their naked

bodies were shorn of skin or cut to the bone or flayed of flesh; and their blood would turn to puss instead of scabs because of the constant rawness of their wounds.

At night, they wept together in the darkness, shivering on beds of wet moss, soothing each other's wounds with tears. In the morning, when they woke, they would begin again their aimless migration through the abysmal vastness.

There was no sense of the world's passing in the Forest of Sores, no fleeting indication of the motions of time. The momentary provocations of agony were equal to a prolonged suffering that defined them forever.

Random violations of innocence are liable to induce a reaction of ferocity. The wild beast that suffers the taunts of the baiter responds with a superior malice in its defence. There is an abiding equality between chasteness and cruelty—just as a diamond is an intensification of the mineral implications of coal.

The Sisters of No Mercy were in a very bad way when the Mother of Sores called them to her roost. But the Mother soothed them with her balms and tended them with a loving hand they had known only for each other. Then the Mother told them of what they must do to purge themselves of their eternal suffering in the Forest of Sores.

And then the Mother gave them Weapons.

Once, they had been three, searching together for enemies in the world of linear men.

But not anymore.

Middle Sister was dead.

And the Sisters of No Mercy would honour her memory with a measure of cruelty that was equal to her prodigious chasteness.

The Light That Never Shines was accustomed to shadows. Or maybe the shadows were accustomed to her.

Either way, she slipped from the gloom like she was casting a cloak off her back, and blended in with a shaft of light that filled the street like liquid metal fills a mould.

The Light That Never Shines was hungry for a skin to wear. She

dressed herself in skins and could reproduce one for every occasion. That was the secret of blending in. Her body had absorbed them and she could muster them at will – a skin for all seasons – and right now was the season was for harvesting.

She smiled, but it was nothing to do with feeling happy. She smiled because it was always the season for harvesting.

And tonight she was planning a good yield.

The Salon of Catastrophists lay on the border between the Cerebral and Cymbeline districts. It was a guild frequented by an exclusive coterie of artists, poets and theoreticians renowned for their speculations on the various ways in which Life as they knew it would come to an end.

The Salon of Catastrophists was a square-shaped, spacious auditorium with a high ceiling and no upper floors but, it was said, plenty of lower ones. On the whole, it was grim. It was also one of the few buildings in the city whose walls were divested of the pictorial extravagance that was common to others. This was in keeping, however, with the principle that buildings should be decorated according to what they were used for; and, given that the Salon of Catastrophists was used for discussions about catastrophe, it is only right that its walls remained bare.

Members of the guild generally assembled to practice rituals of attainment and loss, consisting of recitals, readings, performances and exhibitions, followed by uproarious drinking sessions (lasting for days) that were intended to convey the passage of Life through various stages of degeneration. Yet, in spite of the seeming absence of formality, the Salon of Catastrophists was organised into two distinct intellectual groups.

Overall, it is agreed by the Catastrophists that the Universe is encoded with contradictory conditions of order and chaos which necessitate its failure as a sustainable entity. To this extent, all things are destined to perish: but the question remains as to the nature of *how?*

In their attempts to resolve this issue, the Salon of Catastrophists has become divided into the Continuity and Discontinuity Schisms.

The Discontinuity Schism believe that the destruction of the Uni-

verse will come as a result of a catastrophic deterioration or collapse – a Cataclysm – while the Continuity Schism is firmly opposed to a climactic destruction, and prefers to concern itself with theories such as the "Permanence of Disorientation." The Permanence of Disorientation states that the Universe consists of a continual extinction of its contingent parts, which are simultaneously replenished by their re-emergence as universal forces (life, light, precipitation, and so on) which, in turn, begin to decay at the very moment of their re-emergence as existing phenomena.

There are, of course, various interpretations that apply to Continuity Theory, but the Continuity Schism can be roughly summarised as a belief that the world exists in a state of perpetual calamity, which also implies that Existence and Time are essentially meaningless.

As such, the Continuity Schism tended to appeal to thinkers who were not inclined towards divine interpretations of catastrophe, while the opposite was true of the Discontinuity Schism. But the Continuity Schism did have its share of fanatics.

The Psychomatics, for example, were prepared to take extreme measures in order to emphasise the legitimacy of their position. They were the militant wing of the Continuity Schism who sought an active involvement in the way of the world as they defined it. In other words, they liked destroying things – or, more to the point, they liked destroying people. Which is why they had developed a formidable range of expertise in various means of sabotage and assassination.

It had taken the Gutter a lot of effort to find this out – and a lot of gutting. He had first been alerted to the Psychomatics when he was doing some reconnaissance work on a Meta-Warrior called Hecticon who was posing as a linear usurper in the disputed northern province of Uìn. As luck would *not* have it, the Psychomatics had tried to assassinate Hecticon while the Gutter was trying to figure out a way to do the same. When their attempt had failed, Hecticon stepped up his security measures which made him temporarily unavailable for an appointment with the Gutting Knife. So the Gutter decided to do some reconnaissance work on the Psychomatics instead. The fact that they'd targeted a Meta-Warrior like Hecticon had led him to suspect

that they might have been acting under the influence of a non-linear element.

Which, as it happens, is perfectly true.

There was a bee wrestling with a bud on the ground that had fallen off the broken stalk of a wilting flower that was growing from a crack in the ruptured brickwork.

The Light That Never Shines reflected on the fact that she had seen linear men and women work with the same mindless vigour, and with the same failure to comprehend the underlying motivations of their most rudimentary tasks.

"*Are you any different?*"

"Of course," she replied. "My automatic functions are distinguishable for their emphasis on the wilful elimination, rather than preservation, of my species. To this extent, it is not a question of performing rudimentary tasks in order to survive, but a question of killing or being killed."

"*Is there a difference?*"

"Yes, there is. It depends on the amount of risk you are exposed to. I am exposed to an extreme measure of danger in performing my routine tasks; a common bee is exposed to much less; while a linear human (except in cases of disease, famine or war) is exposed to almost none at all."

At the same time, the Light That Never Shines had been careful to take advantage of occasional individuals who surfaced from the linear tide with an almost Meta-Warrioristic compulsion to commit themselves to *a cause*.

"*But who's to say they're right to do so?*"

That's obvious, thought The Light That Never Shines.

She was.

The Light That Never Shines arose from her basic element wearing a singularity of dark matter that had no basis in – was a precursor of – the totality of form.

Emerging from her non-awareness, and having only been able to register her existence through emotions, she was formulaically integrated into a linear means of physicality.

The Light That Never Shines had known the primordial absence of herself without ever knowing that she had existed.

Until that time.

"Existence can only be measured by the fact that it must come to an end," she told herself. "Is this what it means to say, *I live?* Which is only another way of saying that *I must die?"*

The Light That Never Shines had harvested a multitude of skins in order to saturate herself in the depths of personality that she was lacking until, finally, she consisted of more expressions of herself than she could account for. The intellectual capacities of her various aspects are boundless to the point that, mathematically, she is devastating and, poetically, she is the purveyor of many fine examples of genius.

"*But are you afraid?*" she asked an emerging version of herself.

"No," she replied – but, in actual fact, she was.

There was a bad rain blowing in the faces of the Sisters of No Mercy. Their vision was blurred. Their long hair swept dark and lank across their faces. The Wilden Howe was a dismal place. But the Sisters didn't mind. It was an ideal place for killing an enemy, which is why they were there.

The Wilden Howe was a small peninsula that jutted into the Sea of Absences off the headland of Noth. It was a barren shaft of land that degenerated into cliffs along its coasts, with occasional lagoons and shingle beaches offering treacherous points of access from the broiling sea.

The currents around the Wilden Howe were a distortion of the Laws of Nature. On the northeast side, a gigantic maelstrom presented a terrifying hazard to ships and skiffs, many of which had been swallowed up in its liquid maw.

The Howe itself was a harsh domain of haggard grasses and windswept moss, with stagnant pools and peat-bogs in the lower reaches,

and broad summits of granite that rose like warped skulls through skins of vegetation.

It was a perfect place for smuggling cartels to ply their trade, which is why Whorefrost was there. Whorefrost was posing as a Harbour Lord from the Isle of Balloch who specialised in trafficking sex slaves from the mainland to a wide variety of island groups. It was a position that afforded him a reasonable degree of power and influence, which he was able to use for the more pressing business of destroying his foes.

"Not a bad racket," admitted Little Sister, as if being forced to swallow a live insect.

"No," said Big Sister, "not bad at all."

"But not," said Little Sister, watching the lone figure of Whorefrost approaching through the mist, "*that* good."

"No," agreed Big Sister, "not fucking good at all."

Whorefrost was up against a dangerous adversary. Perhaps it was the extent of their erotic appeal that was making him lose his concentration. But Whorefrost knew that he didn't require any concentration when it came to a fight.

The smooth strokes of his baton were deftly applied but, oddly enough for a weapon forged in the shape of a penis, lacking penetration. His every move was blocked, his every subtlety anticipated.

The Sisters were good – *too fucking good.*

As his frustration increased, he began to lose his balance; and, finally, he overreached with a blow that was aimed at the little one's head. She whirled her body out of his range while the other, the big one, swung her sword upwards in a gentle arc.

In a sense, he was lucky that it struck him directly on the point of his elbow, or else it might have lopped off his lower arm. The pain, however, was outrageous. But what alarmed him most was the sight of his baton flying out of his hand and landing well beyond his immediate reach.

In the meantime, the little one had recovered her poise. She smacked him across the back of his head with the flat of her blade and sent him sprawling forward onto the wet grass, face-first.

And vulnerable.

"Well, fuck me," said the little one behind him. "I bet you were thinking you were lucky you didn't lose your lower arm."

Fuck her, she was right.

The next thing he knew there was a muffled thud that sounded like a spade being driven into wet soil. It wasn't. It was Little Sister's long sword hacking into his lower arm which, this time, was removed within two or three fleeting strokes.

Everything after that was a blur.

First: the big one started to hack off his other arm so that he was left completely helpless. But alive.

Second: the little one was doing something he couldn't work out, untying his pantaloons and dragging them down around his ankles, but leaving them there so his legs were tied.

Third: the big one sat down on his chest, pinning him to the ground (as if he was capable of doing anything anyway).

And it was then that the real pain started.

Little Sister liked to keep her blade raw and jagged so that, when she cut somebody, it was going to hurt, which is exactly what she was intending now. She took a grip of Whorefrost's penis and started sawing through it with a lazy vigour, and the screams of Whorefrost confirmed the fact that her intentions were being well met.

Whorefrost may have been bleeding to death already, due to the gushing stumps of his missing arms, but he was going to die by choking on his own cock. Little Sister made sure of that when she rammed it down his throat; and, to this extent, no one could fault her for not remaining true to her word.

The removal of Whorefrost's cock had been a piece of butcher's work, deliberately undertaken with a fastidious lack of care. The removal of his testicles, however, was a different affair, whereby Little Sister demonstrated an expertise and slight of hand that was worthy of a master surgeon. She sliced open his egg-sac and eased the testicles into an alchemical container that would keep them nice and fresh for whatever purposes they had in mind.

Which is why the Sisters of No Mercy were already making their way

south, to the City of Thrills, to rendezvous with their linear informers – the Covenant of Ichor.

Things were things happening in the City of Thrills. Things were always happening in the City of Thrills.

But not like today.

Up until now, the City of Thrills was a vacuum of architectures avoiding collapse. Now, however, it seemed like the collapse was inevitable.

But it wouldn't be the buildings. No. The feeling of collapse was wholly concentrated on the people – not the people people, but the *other* people.

Some of them were here.

The Light That Never Shines could feel it, as surely as she would feel a knife in the guts.

Guts? Why was she thinking *Guts?*

In spite of the prodigious range of her mathematical genius, the Light That Never Shines had only a vague presentiment of why she was feeling the way she was now. But she was seldom wrong, so it seemed right that she should expose her feeling to the failsafe scrutiny of a few calculations.

She stopped to take a seat outside a winery where some poets and philosophers were sitting on stools arranged around half a dozen massive barrels. She bought herself a skin of wine and proceeded to knock it back like there was no tomorrow.

Maybe there wouldn't be.

When she had reduced herself to a suitable level of artificial calm, she wrangled through the various permutations and, within an hour or so, had come to a conclusion.

Some of them were here. But the odds, she reckoned, were in her favour.

She gazed into her tumbler and began to brood. Then one of the poets from an adjacent barrel took notice of her (you could tell he was a poet because of his wide-brimmed hat). He rose and took a seat beside her, the way that linear people sometimes do.

"Are you lonely, friend?" he asked, setting a fresh-filled skin of wine on the barrel before them. "Are you a poetess? Is that what ails you? I can well understand the burden of fashioning words into things of beauty. It is my trade, too."

She looked at him as placidly as her anxious mood would allow.

"No, she said. "I'm…"

The poet frowned. "What, my friend?"

"A mathematician."

"Oh," said the poet, "I see."

But the Light That Never Shines could see he couldn't see anything.

"And what can your mathematics tell us of our world?" he asked. "Can it tell us as much as poetry?"

"It can tell us that we're doomed."

"Well," he laughed, "if that's the case, then so can poetry."

"But mathematics can tell us *when*."

The poet stared.

"Lady Mathematician," he said, "I wonder if you are not a poetess, after all."

"No," she said. "But if you come with me I'll show you what I am." She adjusted her skin to make herself more alluring. The poet gasped. *Even if I cannot show you why.*

The Light That Never Shines walked anonymously through the dimming streets. It was nearing twilight, her favourite time of day. She had adjusted her skin-tone to suit the occasion. People passing by her may have registered her presence in some subliminal way that their awareness, however, couldn't account for. She was seen and, yet, she remained unnoticed.

She had taken the poet into a backstreet with promises of sexual gratification, but the pleasure had been entirely hers. She had peeled him like a piece of fruit, absorbing his skin with an orgasmic thrill that had restored her to her uttermost vitality.

And now it was time for her to act.

Time for her to summon the Psychomatics.

*

The Gutter stood out like a moth among butterflies. He didn't try to hide the fact. Instead, he was a gaunt-looking fucker with sleepy eyelids that hooded his eyes and made him look like he was capable of doing very bad things.

He was.

He eyeballed people as he walked passed them: they didn't hold his gaze. They looked away like he'd sent an electric shock through their line of vision. This was typical of the Gutter, who was careful to exert his influence over people.

He had found the Salon of Catastrophists on a street called Patron's Way. Patron's Way divided the Cymbeline and Cerebral Districts and was one of the city's liveliest thoroughfares. This explained the heavy presence of City Arbiters idling among the gregarious hordes, with studded coshes dangling from their wrists.

Which, of course, presented certain difficulties when it came to organising an open confrontation with the Psychomatics.

Which is why the Gutter had developed a plan.

The Covenant of Ichor led them to the door of the stairwell for the office of the Information Syndicate.

"I warn you, Sisters, it's an ugly sight." The leader of the local order smiled faintly. "Men are rarely beautiful, especially when they're mutilated. The sight of them may please you nevertheless."

"No," said Little Sister. "It will. Let's go."

The smell of the corpses grew stronger as they ascended the stairs. When they reached them, the Sisters were indeed pleased, but not for the reasons the Ichorites were thinking.

The Sisters of No Mercy quickly assessed the situation – two corpses with their throats cut; the other sliced open along the underside of the belly, with bits of him still hanging out.

"Interesting," said Little Sister.

"Very," Big Sister agreed.

"The two gooks at the door were taken out with minimum fuss, leaving plenty of time for interrogating the Information Master."

"In more ways than one," said Big Sister.

"Quite. These gooks can count themselves lucky."

"Very lucky."

"But not *that* lucky."

"Not fucking lucky at all."

Little Sister sat on her haunches and examined the Information Master. "Looks like he had one of his eyes removed first."

"Looks like he did."

"I guess it was a case of, Tell me, bitch, or I'll skewer the fucking other one."

"Guess it was."

"Well –" Little Sister stood up – "this Information Master looks like he was one hell of a fat cunt. The Gutter must have had himself a rare old treat."

"A very rare treat."

"But not as rare as we'll be having."

"No," said Big Sister, "not so fucking rare as that at all."

The Gutter entered the foyer of the Salon and was immediately accosted by two receptionists who asked him brusquely to declare his business.

"Catastrophe," he said, and proceeded to knock them unconscious with the butt of the Gutting Knife.

He hastened into the auditorium, where a debate involving about fifty attendants was fully underway.

Gradually, the feverish exchange between rival factions began to subside as the whiff of the Gutter spread among them like a toxic fume. Heads were turned. A mixture of bewilderment and disgust washed over their faces like a vapour.

"What is the meaning of this?" declared one wizened old scroat with a coiffed mustachio.

The Gutter fixed a stare on him. The mustachio drooped, perhaps for the first time ever.

"I have a message for the Psychomatics," he said.

The faces of the Catastrophists turned pale in unison.

"Tell them," said the Gutter, "I'll be waiting outside."

Which is where he was now, on the opposite side of Patron's Way,

making no attempt to hide himself. He wanted to be seen. Or maybe they would smell him first.

Either way, he didn't have to wait long. And it was interesting. Because when the Psychomatics stepped out of the Salon they arranged themselves in a line and stared straight at him through the crowd – four of them, all fit-looking fucks with headscarves wrapped around their – No, there were five – a lithe little bitch who looked like a wastrel, hardly noticeable at all.

The Gutter caught her eye and grinned. She was the one. And all the time she stared straight at him.

Clearly, she had recognised him for what he was.

The Light That Never Shines had dressed herself in a skin that made her look as ordinary as possible. As she led the Psychomatics out of the Salon, she quickly assessed the crowd. Within seconds, she saw him.

"There," she said. "Across the street."

"The filthy one?"

She gave a single nod.

"Stop here," she said. "Stare at him. I want to get a measure of his reactions, see if I can work out a weakness."

She couldn't. He didn't give her time.

Instead, he grinned and vanished up a lane that led into the Cerebral District – an interesting choice.

"The dog wants for us to follow him," said one of her companions.

"All right," said the Light That Never Shines. "Let's do what the dog says."

The Covenant of Ichor were an underground sect of religious fanatics who adhered to the belief that it was the role of women to moderate the predominance of their masculine counterparts with whatever ruthless or violent measures were necessary.

The Sisters of No Mercy had, on occasions, aligned themselves to the Ichorites on the pretext of being volunteer assassins who were sympathetic to the Ichorite cause. The Ichorites were in awe of the Sisters, and saw them, perhaps, as a physical embodiment of an ethereal female

influence which, they believed, permeated every aspect of animal, vegetable and mineral existence.

"And who's to say they're not fucking right?" Little Sister had said.

"*Fucking* right," Big Sister agreed. "Even though they're fucking wrong."

But they weren't wrong about other things. They weren't wrong, for example, about where the Gutter had taken up his temporary residence in the City of Thrills.

"Interesting choice," remarked Little Sister when the leader of the local order told them.

"Very interesting," said Big Sister.

"But not a good one."

"No," said Big Sister, "not fucking good at all."

Little Sister turned to face the leader of the local order. "So, he killed the servitors and spilled their guts in the basement, right?"

"Right," said the leader of the local order. "The place is his."

"And now he's playing some game of chase with these fuckers from the Salon."

"Yes. It appears he's leading them to the Museum itself."

Little Sister looked at Big Sister. "What do you think, Sister?"

"I think he's fucking leading them into a fucking trap."

"Why?" said Little Sister.

"Because he's after someone."

"Who?" said Little Sister.

"Someone he wants to lead into a fucking trap."

"But," said Little Sister, "who the fuck would be dumb enough to fall for that?"

Big Sister smiled. "Someone who thinks they can trap him back."

"Someone like us?"

Big Sister nodded. "Someone *very* like us."

"But not as good."

Big Sister frowned. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

The Museum of Darkest Arts was one of the most forgotten buildings in the entire city. To call it a Museum, in fact, was something of a mis-

nomer. In truth, it was more a repository of disastrous failures accumulated over eons of artistic endeavour which had resulted, naturally, in its fair share of flops. Many of these flops had come to rest in the Museum of Darkest Arts, which had acquired its name more in jest than in earnest.

The building itself was largely obscured by the buildings around it, which wasn't a bad thing. Inside, it consisted of innumerable corridors, stairways and halls, all of which were bent out of shape and designed as if by an architect bordering on insanity. The near darkness of its interior was also patrolled by two decrepit servitors who were now lying dead in one of its many basements – their throats cut, their bellies razed.

The Light That Never Shines could sense the aura of death when she entered, but couldn't be sure if this was the result of a mathematical or sensory deduction. She was sure, however, about her plan.

"We split up," she said, ignoring the uneasy looks of her companions.

She was reckoning on implementing an increased number of distractions by instructing the Psychomatics to wander separately through the Gutter's hunting ground. If they remained as a group, the Gutter would monitor them and trap them too easily. By multiplying the targets, she would improve the ratio of possibilities as regards turning the hunter into the hunted.

It was all about odds; and, from the point of view of saving her skins, her plan was absolutely necessary.

Toran Finniff was a specialist in pyrotechnics who had joined the Psychomatics over a year ago. He wasn't adept at stealth missions like this one. He was usually a behind-the-scenes man who preferred operating from afar.

Which made him easy meat for the Gutter, who leapt out from behind a garish figurine fashioned in the likeness of fuck knows what.

The Gutter plunged the Gutting Knife into the man's abdomen and dragged it sidewise with a vicious twist that tore a gash across his belly. The Gutter felt the warmth of entrails spilling over his hand, and it was good.

Toran Finniff didn't scream when he was riffed, but merely exhaled like a punctured bladder. When he hit the ground, he groaned in despair at his sudden demise. The groan wafted like one of the Gutter's smells through the gloomy halls and corridors of the Museum.

The Gutter was pleased by this effect.

It would scare the living shit out of them.

The Jiggler was an assassin who specialised in the use of a blow pipe loaded with poison darts. The environmental drawbacks of the Museum of Darkest Arts displeased him.

He had found himself emerging from a staircase onto a causeway suspended over a space of darkness which he took to be some kind of architectural feature.

He leaned over the railing and peered.

Nothing.

He leaned back and flinched when he heard the lingering groan of someone dying. He froze and listened.

The noise of the groan was coming from everywhere.

The Jiggler hastened across the causeway and entered a meandering corridor where the Gutter was waiting for him with a grin on his lips that writhed like worms.

A blow pipe was useless under such circumstances.

Even as the Jiggler backed off from his attacker, the blows were reigning down on his chest, splitting his ribs like bits of kindling and bursting the organs underneath.

The Jiggler neither screamed nor groaned. He spluttered.

And the splutters resonated like an underground stream across the awkward vaults of the Museum.

And, once again, the Gutter was pleased.

Mattosis was drawn by the sound of the splutter – first one way, then the next.

He didn't like it. Not one bit at all. He was a big man who carried a war hammer under his cloak. But there was no room to swing his mighty weapon in this musty confusion of thwarted pits and warped passages.

He drifted into a stairwell that took him deeper into the murk of a lower level of display chambers. A single torch-light blazed in one of them. Like a moth to the flame, Mattosis was drawn.

The restricted illuminations revealed a multitude of obscure paintings screwed to the walls; and, for a moment, Mattosis lost himself in the fantastical array of artistic fiascos of bygone epochs.

He smiled when he recognised a post-Apocalyptic landscape created by Meral of Skitten, a pioneer of the Catastrophist Movement whose works were later diminished by the greater accomplishments of his successor, Potriech of Skow. While Potriech's masterpieces took pride of place in the city's galleries, Meral, it seems, had been demoted to the Museum of Darkest Arts, which appeared to Mattosis to be rather unfair.

He fixed his eyes on the canvas splattered with motley shades the colour of gangrene. *The Wrath of Ages* it was called. And, if truth be told, it was an appalling work that conveyed little beyond a congregation of blurs.

Mattosis reflected on the fact that perhaps the work of Meral of Skitten had found an appropriate place of exhibition, after all. He took a step backwards so he could consider the painting in its entirety.

And walked directly onto the point of the Gutting Knife, which pierced his lower back, then slid up at an angle and severed his spine.

Mattosis fell like a piece of timber. His scream was loud but quickly hushed when his vocal chords succumbed to his paralysis. Nevertheless, it tumbled through the gloom of the Museum like a boulder through a gorge.

And the Gutter's lips twitched, which was the nearest thing he would ever come to a smile.

Sweet Dena'han was described by many as the most beautiful woman they had ever seen. Her form was near perfect – her face a living image of grace – and, inside, she was as twisted and gnarled as a withered root.

The curve of her blade matched the curve of her body: they were equally deadly. Sweet Dena'han was an expert at finding her way into the beds of lovers who were actually her victims. They didn't know this

until they woke up in the small hours of the night, choking on their own blood. But it was all part of her delicious charm, which was remarkably false for one so beautiful.

Sweet Dena'han was a Catastrophist fundamentalist who was prepared to allow the violation of her body for the sake of achieving her philosophical aims. It was not that she was cold-blooded in some mentally detached or subjectively callous way. She did what she did with a selfless dedication to the task, and with an admirable disregard for her personal ambition (prior to joining the Psychomatics, Sweet Dena'han had been one of the most promising scholars of her generation).

She searched the precincts of a muddled anteroom that was over-furnished with figures and busts that vied with each other for the absurdity of their composition. Comically hideous faces stared at her from rough-hewn pedestals. Contorted plaster-cast carcasses stooped and lurched as she wove her way between them.

And, suddenly, one of them moved.

It was fortunate for Sweet Dena'han that she had been on her guard. When the Gutter swung the Gutting Knife at her, she raised an arm in her defence, her torcs deflecting the blow successfully.

She span on her feet with her dagger whistling, expecting to land a slash across the Gutter's chest.

But he was gone.

No. He had ducked under the trajectory of the swinging blade and was leering up at her out of a pool of shadows. When he thrust the Gutting Knife up at her, it slammed like a shaft of ice between her legs. Sweet Dena'han produced a scream that filled the entire Museum with a declaration of agony few others could rival.

And there were many would say that her manner of death was perfectly fitting.

After the Psychomatics had followed the Gutter into the Museum of Darkest Arts, the Sisters of No Mercy had followed after them.

But nobody knew that they were there.

Now they were in the basement examining the corpses of the elderly servitors who, after a long life of easy living, had died in monstrous

pain at the behest of the Gutting Knife.

"Serves the fuckers right, really," observed Little Sister.

"Damn right it does," said Big Sister.

"Still," said Little Sister, "it's a crime."

"It's an absolute fucking atrocity," said Big Sister.

Little Sister stood up from the body she'd been bending over.

"But this," she said, now walking over to the corner of the cluttered holding, "is the biggest fucking crime of all."

Big Sister followed her. She was speechless.

"We couldn't have wished it any other way," said Little Sister. She took hold of the lid of the Gutter's churn and began to twist.

Big Sister said nothing. The tear in her eye surely said it all.

The Gutter was pleased he had found the linear stragglers, but disappointed he hadn't found *her*.

But not surprised.

He *was* surprised, however, when she found him.

He was in the Room of Charmless Faces, where you could find some of the most abysmal portraits of leading figures ever seen. Anyone else might have been unnerved by the dozens of sightless eyes staring down at them, but the Gutter was oblivious. He stepped lightly across the floorboards – paused and sniffed. He cocked his head to one side and listened, sure of the fact that his quarry was within range.

She was.

The attack not only came from the shadows – it *was* the shadows. The Gutter reeled away from the clawing hands of the Light That Never Shines, unable to see them. The hands, he knew at once, were her Weapons. The fingers of the Light That Never Shines had been fitted with barbs designed to get under the skin, quite literally, of her adversaries. But the Gutter's attire was giving her problems.

The Gutter's smock was thick and greasy with the collective slime of his activities over the years. Unbeknown to him, it had provided him with an impenetrable defence mechanism against the kind of assault he was facing now.

The smock was layered in the bodily juices of a thousand victims

whose guts he'd eaten with a messy voracity that had soaked the thing repeatedly in liquid filth. The result was the formation of a reptilian integument that was both slippery and tough as lead. When the Light That Never Shines tore at the smock, her fingers slid harmlessly off its surface without purchase; and her desperation, with each failed attempt, was beginning to show.

The Gutter spun away from her frantic grasps until it dawned on him their effect was minimal. He immediately increased the frequency of his counterattacks, while cautiously avoiding her swipes at his exposed head. Patience, he decided, was the key. He would bleed her dry – bleed her to death, if necessary.

The Gutter teased her rather than retaliated; but the effect was the same. Within minutes, the Light That Never Shines began to show signs of wilting. The Gutting Knife drew fresh wounds across her arms and legs and upper body, diminishing her strength to a point of weakness. Finally, exhaustion overcame her, and she slumped to the ground with a breathless acceptance of her doom.

The Gutter leaned over her with a mind to savouring her distress. But the look of melancholy on her face (the Gutter had expected terror, rage, contempt or incredulity) unbalanced him.

"Gutter," she panted, her staring eyes like distant moons. "Tell me," she gasped, "what are we, Gutter? What are we and *why?*"

The Gutter's lips tightened. There was a gleam in his eye that might have been sorrow.

"I eat guts," he said at last. "How the fuck would I know?"

And the Gutting Knife fell with a hideous glimmer and finished her off.

The Gutter entered the basement dragging the wasted frame of the Light That Never Shines behind him. He dumped her corpse amid a heap of broken effigies that had lain there for years.

The churn was in the corner, where he had left it during his encounter with the Psychomatics. He hastened towards it and drew it over to the still-warm body of the Light That Never Shines. He unscrewed the lid, set it aside, and proceeded to slice open her belly and shovel her guts

into the churn with cupped hands that were used to this manoeuvre.

The guts of the Information Master were already in there, and the remnants of others from previous weeks. The brine had kept them reasonably fresh or, at least, succulent. The stench that erupted from the churn was making the Gutter drool like a cur.

When he'd emptied the belly of the Light That Never Shines, he squatted over the churn and began to scoop large portions of innards into his eager mouth. He sucked on wet strands of disgorged viscera that slithered between his gums like snakes, and thrust his palms into his face to lick up the remainder. He must have been about halfway through his feast when he ladled one of Whorefrost's testicles into his mouth and swallowed it whole. As far as the Gutter was concerned, it was just another piece of deliciously stinking meat.

But the Sisters of No Mercy knew otherwise.

It only took a matter of minutes for the testicle to succumb to the initial stages of the digestive process.

It was enough.

The Gutter's body suddenly stiffened without his effort. He groaned weirdly, like a fish on a hook might do if it could make one.

The Sisters stepped out from their place of hiding. The Gutter fell to one side, his head at an angle staring up at them in disbelief. His confusion, however, was secondary to the sensations that were rifting through the internal parts of his physique. The crippling immanence of Whorefrost's sperm was doing its worst, feeling its way through the labyrinth of his anatomy. The Gutter squirmed like a maggot on a pinhead. Guttural sounds came from his throat. It appeared that he no longer possessed the vocal capacities to issue a scream.

"Well, well, well," said Little Sister. "What have we here?"

Big Sister rested an arm on her sister's shoulder and said:

"Well, blow me hard if it's not the little fucker who killed our Middle Sister, Sister."

Little Sister said: "You don't fucking say."

"Oh yes," said Big Sister, "I fucking do."

"In that case," said Little Sister, "maybe we shouldn't bother to explain what the fuck he's eaten."

"You mean the demon semen of that motherless fuck whose balls we clipped the other day?"

"That's the one."

"Naw," said Big Sister, "I wouldn't want to know if I was in his fucking position."

"Right," said Little Sister. "So let's shut the fuck up and watch the fucker die like the fucker he is."

Which is exactly what they did. And the Gutter didn't disappoint them. He lasted for about three hours, as long as someone of his constitution would be expected to.

After it was done, Little Sister sighed and said:

"So that's that."

Big Sister bowed her head and said:

"So it was."

"It was good to watch the bastard die so fucking horribly," said Little Sister.

"Damn right," said Big Sister. "It was the fucking best."

"But," sighed Little Sister, "I kind of feel it could've been better."

Big Sister took her Little Sister in her arms, her eyes full of tears.

"I know," she said, her voice no more than a whisper. "I know."

SYMPOSIUM

The New Weird Discussions: The Creation of a Term

IN APRIL 2003, M. John Harrison asked a question on his Third Alternative Message Board that eventually led to the creation, promulgation, mutation and distortion of the term "New Weird." This was an offshoot, as far as we can tell, of a conversation that originated on Steph Swainston's message board, but only reached critical mass with Harrison's question.

We've reproduced the first part of that public discussion below, filling in full names where we know them. We have preserved many idiosyncrasies of punctuation and phrasing that are in keeping with online communication.

The entire discussion took place over several months and many thousands of words. Several other individuals, including Jeffrey Ford, Michael Cisco, Kathryn Cramer, one of the editors of this very anthology (Jeff VanderMeer), and, perhaps most notably, China Miéville, eventually entered into the fray. An archive of the entirety of this very public investigation of New Weird exists on Kathryn Cramer's website at: *www.kathryncramer.com/kathryn_cramer/2007/07/the-new-weird-a.html.* – THE EDITORS

M. John Harrison (Tuesday, April 29, 2003 – 10:39 am): The New Weird. Who does it? What is it? Is it even anything? Is it even New? Is it, as some think, not only a better slogan than The Next Wave, but also incalculably more fun to do? Should we just call it Pick'n'Mix instead? As ever, *your* views are the views we want to hear –

Zali Krishna: Is it a bit like science fantasy but with more than a passing nod towards horror? Presumably the "Weird" refers back to *Weird Tales* – a pre-generic pulp era where SF, fantasy and horror were less well defined. I'm guessing here, based upon the Miéville attribution. Personally I think "Weird Shit" would be a better label – I'd like to see bookshops with a Weird Shit section…

Jonathan Oliver: Who coined the phrase The New Weird? I haven't seen it in use before?

Al Robertson: Would definitely rush to Weird Shit shelves, think they should be balanced with Heavy Shit also. Dictionary Weird – "Strange or bizarre…supernatural, uncanny" Uncanny's nice – makes me think of unheimlich, which I suppose is a v. good definition of it – uncomforting fiction…

Krishna: I'm not sure I'd go near uncanny shelves. I've seen what sort of injuries falling books can cause. "Excuse me miss, can I see the Heavy Shit librarian?"

Harrison: Nuevo Weird? [Zali], the Heavy Shit librarian, sums things up as ever. It makes that exact allusion to *Weird Tales* and especially the fact that, back then, in that marvellous & uncorrupted time of the world, everything could still be all mixed up together – horror, sf, fantasy – and no one told you off or said your career was over with their firm if you kept doing that. I heard it in conversation with China Miéville his self, and cheekily reapplied it in a preface to "The Tain" (mainly so I could use the title "China Miéville & the New Weird", which I thought was second in impact only to "Uncle Zip and the New Nuevo Tango"). He writes it. But who else? And what are its exact parameters? Indeed, do we *want* it to have exact parameters? Do we even want it? Is it, as Steph says, instantly rendered Old by being spoken of as New?

Stephanie Swainston: The New Weird is a wonderful development in literary fantasy fiction. I would have called it Bright Fantasy, because

it is vivid and because it is clever. The New Weird is a kickback against jaded heroic fantasy which has been the only staple for far too long. Instead of stemming from Tolkien, it is influenced by *Gormenghast* and *Viriconium*. It is incredibly eclectic, and takes ideas from any source. It borrows from American Indian and Far Eastern mythology rather than European or Norse traditions, but the main influence is modern culture – street culture – mixing with ancient mythologies. The text isn't experimental, but the creatures are. It is amazingly empathic. What is it like to be a clone? Or to walk on your hundred quirky legs? The New Weird attempts to explain. It acknowledges other literary traditions, for example Angela Carter's mainstream fiction, or classics like Melville. Films are a source of inspiration because action is vital. The elves were first up against the wall when the revolution came, and instead we want the vastness of the science fiction film universe on the page.

There is a lot of genre-mixing going on, thank god. (Jon Courtnay Grimwood mixes futuristic sf and crime novels). The New Weird grabs everything, and so genre-mixing is part of it, but not the leading role. The New Weird is secular, and very politically informed. Questions of morality are posed. Even the politics, though, is secondary to this subgenre's most important theme: detail.

The details are jewel-bright, hallucinatory, carefully described. Today's Tolkienesque fantasy is lazy and broad-brush. Today's Michael Marshall thrillers rely lazily on brand names. The New Weird attempts to place the reader in a world they do not expect, a world that surprises them – the reader stares around and sees a vivid world through the detail. These details – clothing, behaviour, scales and teeth – are what makes New Weird worlds so much like ours, as recognisable and as well-described. It is visual, and every scene is packed with baroque detail. Nouveau-goths use neon and tinsel as well as black clothes. The New Weird is more multi-spectral than gothic.

But one garuda does not make a revolution… There are not many New Weird writers because it is so difficult to do. Where is the rest? Jeff Noon? Samuel R. Delany? Do we have to wait for parodies of Bas-Lag? [M. John Harrison,] how many revolutions have you been part of?? The New Weird is energetic. Vivacity, vitality, detail; that's what it's

about. Trappings of Space Opera or Fantasy may be irrelevant when the Light is turned on.

Des Lewis: Vivid and clever, yes, and uncluttered. The text itself need not be untextured, though. Densely textured (or neo-Proustian) *and* limpid would apply to the New Weird at different times… but always uncluttered by anything else or anything unconnected with the text.

Swainston: Des: I agree. So the text is not "baroque"; style must be elegant even though it can be dense. On a practical level, the speed of reading is very important for action scenes! The surreal aspect is my favourite (I like colourful) but even in this the New Weird is not New – Moorcock's "End of Time" books. The sub-genre is a combination of all these traits. But let's not make it too proscriptive…

John Powell: "in that marvellous & uncorrupted time of the world, everything could still be all mixed up together – horror, sf, fantasy – and no one told you off or said your career was over with their firm if you kept doing that." You could also include "realistic" fiction, thriller and symbolist fiction in that definition. The book I am reading, half way through it, *Rain*, by Karen Duve, uses alot of those categories. It's very sly about it, and very, very funny. It seems realist, straight sober, well-mannered fiction but it subverts the entire ball game. So far anyway. She is very talented.

Jonathan Strahan: Or is it the sound of one hand re-inventing itself? I can't believe anyone is proposing another possible movement title. I mean aren't you a New Wave Fabulist or something? Seriously… I think it's a load of old cobblers. Much like the new space opera (a term invented by a bunch of critics to cover the fact that they got distracted by cyberpunk and didn't notice that no one had stopped writing the other stuff), the new weird/new wave fabulist/slipstream whatever seems to be a pretty happy and healthy outgrowth of some things that came before which would probably be much better off if left unlabelled and left to grow in the dark where they belong. I certainly can't believe

that you (MJH), China, VanderMeer, or anyone else would be better off if you were packaged up with some handy-dandy label.

Powell: I understand this idea differently. So called mainstream Anglo-American fiction tends to be very literal minded. A chair is a chair, a bus is a bus kind of thing. You can't have the vertical stripes of a John Lewis logo morphing into a vision of distant hills. It just wouldn't do. Thus you have mainstream on the one hand and science fiction on the other. Only in science fiction does the logo morph, etc. This bifurcation is less pronounced in European literature. The metaphysical *is* in the mainstream.

Robertson: Have been pondering all this myself recently – and ranting to people about it as non-realist fiction, ie fiction that's aware that it's not real (it's just ink on paper, at the end of the day) and does interesting things with this, at whatever level.

I don't see the point in trying to make a literal representation of a reality (itself a doomed enterprise) to talk about that reality, when you can have a dragon stick its head through the window, or the ghost of a spaceman wander past. For me, abandoning strict definitions of the real (tho' I think you still need emotional / thematic / internal coherence etc) leads to more interesting narratives, richer imagery, and a wider field of view in general.

I do hesitate slightly to put a name on things – tho' it's good to have an inclusive banner to march under, it's also problematic if that becomes an exclusive banner to judge with. My attitude – if it works, use it, if it doesn't, find out why, and use that knowledge. Having said that, there's definitely something developing out there…

Swainston: Jonathan: yes, agree that these authors would be better off without labels at all. Each is so individual anyway: China is writing his own style, etc. But they're too smart to feel limited by the fact some reviewer has bounded them together.

That the authors have ten labels thrust upon the authors by readers/reviewers/publishers probably makes them want to rationalise it into

one label! It isn't the authors doing the labelling, or wishing to join anything. Perhaps the rest of us are just trying to make sense of it.

This is not the crest of a high and beautiful wave – it's a sub-genre with a lot of developing to do. Good writers are going to do what they do regardless of others' labelling and they'll outlive any fad (if this really exists, and if it is a fad).

Rick (last name unknown): I have to confess that this thread represents the extent of my exposure to the New Weird. So far my initial reaction is similar to Jonathan S's. Apart from the new label (Oh good, another new label…), what is new? Judging by Steph's explanation above, Clive Barker and Christopher Fowler have been newly weird for years, and possibly Banks as well sometimes. You might even be able to get away with hiding some of Moorcock's antiheroic stuff in there too – although perhaps not stylistically. A list of influences and sources from which borrowing is identifiable does not bode well for an exciting new movement.

The healthiest stuff has always mixed and matched or mismatched without regard for labels. With determined *dis*regard for labels. A new movement… Apart from stuff like cyberpunk and space opera, which have the definition built into the label thus making it really easy for everyone, many of the movements that have gone before seemed to represent more of a shape-shifting, natural mutation: magic realism, Brit new wave, slipstream. All reactionary, but with blurred or easily disposable manifestos.

New labels and sub-genres encourage people to try to write what fits fashion. Cyberpunk should have made that clear (shudders). Don't like labels. Don't like canons. Like beer.

Harrison: Hi Jonathan. The old dog learns to amuse itself wherever it can, sometimes by learning new tricks, sometimes by the copious use of irony, sometimes both. I believe I'm an honorary New Wave Fabulist, yes, along with about twenty other puzzled people. Generous of Brad Morrow to bestow that laurel on me after I so repeatedly savaged his New Gothic in the *TLS* [*Times Literary Supplement*] in the 90s. As Steph

remarked, "MJH, how many revolutions have you been part of?" Two or three, I suppose, and sometimes I was there and sometimes I wasn't. That history gives me satisfactions, along with a point of view on names and naming, that you can't have.

One thing is, I think it reductive to describe China or Justina or Al Reynolds (neither do I think you will be able to describe Steph herself), as a mere regrowth from some buried root. You may be able to describe many US Next Wavers as that, I'm sure. Were you intending to be reductive there, Jonathan, or was that just an accident of prose? Reductivism can be so close to belittling, can't it? Don't you find?

Another thing is, in misreading my opening post here (and ignoring the actual information contained in my second one) you underestimate not just the cheerful ironic glee of new-movement-naming; you underestimate the amount of agenda involved. If I don't throw my hat in the ring, write a preface, do a guest editorial here, write a review in the *Guardian* there, then I'm leaving it to Michael Moorcock or David Hartwell to describe what I (and the British authors I admire) write. Or, god forbid, I wake up one morning and find *you* describing me.

There's a war on here, Jonathan. It's the struggle to name. The struggle to name is the struggle to own. Surely you're not naive enough to think that your bracingly commonsensical, "I think it's a lot of old cobblers" view is anything more than a shot in it? One more question, and I think very pertinent to that last one – Why do you want us to remain in the dark where we belong, Jonathan? What might your unconscious motive be for wanting that, do you think?

Rick: Steph: "they're too smart to feel limited by the fact some reviewer has bounded them together"... definitely. The danger is probably for new writers who have yet to build confidence, literary identity and voice.

Mike: your last post is scary. You describe a literary/political struggle that cries out for canons. Another weapon of ownership surely.

For the record, I think China M is brilliant both as a writer, and in his willingness to stand up and be counted where his politics are concerned. Justina is brilliant too. Neither can be described as "mere regrowth

from some buried root". You've said yourself that there is nothing but influence. The trouble with labels and movements is that they imply parameters. They encourage people to disassemble what is a fully synthesised whole in a quest for its building blocks, its influences. To deembed (?). There is plenty that's new or fresh… or that *feels* new and fresh. What are we after? To define it so we can break it down into identifiable components? What then? Understand the bits in a stab at literary determinism. Study enough bits and all possible texts will emerge? Ownership…

Powell: Structure is what I think we are after. (What I am, anyway.) Handke: "Work is almost all structure…" You get the structure, you can do the essay. The story. Or whatever. It falls into place. You can complete. No structure, no completion. (e.g. hard to write an essay on what science fiction is without limiting terms to structure it. On the other hand, what does limit it? Nothing? On these grounds – no essay.)

Justina Robson: It's like Venn diagrams, isn't it? Everyone involved in artistic creation has a whole lot of things going on at once. Some are big footprints over predecessors and some come in from the quirky sidelines of whoever's life it is and taken all together you have a full picture of what someone's doing at a particular moment.

Trouble is, all of those Venn circles are politically charged and economically charged, like it or not. The assignment of value (quality) is something you have to do because you're human and everything has to be categorised somewhere on the scale of Important To Me/Not Important To Me. We all know, mostly to our cost, exactly what the Science Fiction/Fantastic stamp is worth in the contemporary economy of literature. It's so powerful a stamp that Margaret Atwood's publicist has gone to enormous lengths (and has been aided) to make sure it doesn't appear in any review of *Oryx and Crake* in mainstream press. (I say this because as far as I've been able to track it through a discussion on FEM-SF, [Margaret Atwood] herself has never derided SF.)

Saying these divisions are cobblers expresses justified exasperation but it's disingenuous. This is a war, the winners get all the loot and to

name the Truth. I think [M. John Harrison] is right. It's also why his stand to claim the right to define, and China's stand, and my stand…is pissing in the wind unfortunately as none of us has Recognised Power of Naming.

I think that Literature is going to come to SF and try and take the entire thing over by main force in the next five years. Compare, for interest, two recent publications: Jeff Noon's *Falling Out of Cars* and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*. (Personally I think the main difference will be that one is fun to read and the other isn't, but that's not what I'm getting at. I think these two books are about exactly the same thing.) I think this has to happen, because the world has turned into a SF world. This won't prevent SF itself remaining marginalised and associated with Trek and Buffy conventions, sigh, and the reason is that if you could read a new book by an unknown author from a devalued genre then you will never set it up alongside a book from a well-known author from an overvalued genre (see peer pressure, psychological weakness of human species, consensus etc…).

Henry: It seems to me that to describe the New Weird as a movement or a school is to fall into a trap; one immediately starts trying to categorize, to reduce, to say that writers of the New Weird are x, y and z, and that x, y and z are what is important about them. It's only one short step from there to self-published manifestoes, official goals, and Five Year Programmes. I reckon that it's more useful to think of the New Weird as an argument. An argument between a bunch of writers who read each other, who sometimes influence each other, sometimes struggle against that influence. Who don't ever agree on what the New Weird is, on where it starts and stops, but are prepared to harangue each other about it. Describing the New Weird in these terms involves its own kind of codswallop, but at least it's a less constricting kind of codswallop. But I'm an academic rather than a writer; I *look* and *read* but I don't *do* so I'm writing this from the outside.

Cheryl Morgan: Labels are marketing gimmicks. I've been asked to be on a panel about the New Weird (although it isn't called that) at Wiscon.

The main reason the panel exists is that China is one of the [Guests of Honor] and lots of eager Americans want to know where they can find "more like this". So, yes, Jonathan, it may be a load of old cobblers from a literary theory point of view, but it is also an opportunity to sell more books, and perhaps even secure a US publishing contract or two. So who wants me to claim them for the New Weird?

Rick: I could live with that as an alternative interpretation, but then it becomes an in-crowd in-joke. MJP: I think there's scope for debate about carts and horses here. Structure is often something that is only seen in retrospect. Depending on the method favoured by the writer, it is not unusual for structure to be the last thing on an author's mind. In these cases it emerges from the struggle and the resolution. Completion occurs and then, later, the structure is perceived…

Robertson: Hmm – labels certainly marketing gimmicks, and with my marketing hat on New Weird vs. useful label, clearly defined area of fiction appealing to clearly defined target marketplace etc.

But I don't like talking about fiction like this, hold onto notion that you write what you need to write and that the great struggle as a writer is not to write like a part of a school but to write like yourself. Other considerations certainly present, but secondary.

If people can be recognisably grouped, it's I hope because they share concerns / strategies / effects / etc, because they share these they create fiction that has a common mindset – that overlaps with each other – not because they've taken a market driven or insecurity driven decision to do so. I hope that you are a certain type of person, with certain interests, certain concerns, therefore become a certain type of writer as a natural expression of where you are. Perhaps naive – certainly economically so.

Therefore label useful as a means of identifying that sharedness, but something that comes after the writing, not before it or driving it. Rick – totally agree – structure (at least, critical structure) often retrospective – a post rationalisation of something that was intuitive when carried out.

But naming is power (as [M. John Harrison] points out) because it defines the thing named, includes certain things / people / etc, excludes certain things / people / etc. But if the name doesn't work it will be shortlived. There has to be an interaction, a sense of appropriate relationship. If the name is wrong, created for short term political reasons, whatever, it will drop away. Hype great but temporary, it never lasts, it's quality that endures.

Strahan: Hi Mike – "The old dog learns to amuse itself wherever it can, sometimes by learning new tricks, sometimes by the copious use of irony, sometimes both." I certainly saw the irony [in] it, and even wondered if there was more than a little desire to struggle against the labelling impulse by throwing more labels out there just to mischievously confuse the labelers…I don't think I've heard of a single [New Wave Fabulist] who was pleased with or felt some connection to the label. I don't even think [the editor Peter] Straub had anything to do with it, so it's a little unfortunate it is gaining any currency.

No, I wasn't attempting to be reductive or to in any sense belittle the achievement of any of the writers mentioned in this forum. What I was suggesting though, is that the endless search by a small-ish group of commentators to label and sort what is happening in the genre is a) reductive itself and b) ignores the fact that many of those writers are wholly or in part influenced by existing traditions. I would also add that I strongly feel that any label reduces and limits perception of a work of art, and so is often less than helpful. I also note my own tendency to a) label and b) use labels. It's something I try to fight.

Well, I would say that rather than misreading [your "cheerful ironic glee"], I took a particular approach…Mike, the only way I'm interested in describing you is as you. Fiction by Mike Harrison is Mike Harrison fiction. It may echo something here or there, but it's still mostly Mike. As to the need to seize the labelling day, as it were – I understand and sympathise. I guess it's just my instinctive reaction to try to beat back the labellers and prevent the very war you mention.

"There's a war on here, Jonathan. It's the struggle to name. The

struggle to name is the struggle to own. Surely you're not naive enough to think that your bracingly commonsensical, "I think it's a lot of old cobblers" view is anything more than a shot in it?" Not at all. I understand, but it rankles. I don't think the war is a productive or intrinsically worthwhile thing because it leads to a reductive view of art rather than an attempt to understand what is actually being achieved by the artists in question.

"Why do you want us to remain in the dark where we belong, Jonathan? What might your unconscious motive be for wanting that, do you think?" I think this is your sense of mischief coming to the fore. I don't think you seriously believe that by ridiculing an attempt to drum up a label for work that may have some vague commonalities that I'm in any way trying to keep anything in the dark. If I have an unconscious motive, it's to not have to go through the whole stupid cyberpunk thing again and live through a decade of people with very little talent dressing their latest trilogy up in new weird drag. Besides, what's the matter with the dark…

Harrison: I agree with everyone here on the basic point. It would be difficult not to, having said so many times that fiction should be written by individuals.

But two things: there *is* a struggle to name, whether we like it or not, and that struggle is also a struggle to define and own. I think labels are crap, but I'm not willing to give up my own definition of what's going on without a fight. Especially, paradoxically, since one of the best things going on with this form of fiction is its genuinely unlabelable (is that a word?) quality, the sense I have of real, lively writers doing exactly what they want to do. So please excuse me, all of you, if I go over the top a bit about this sometimes.

I think I agree most with Justina and Cheryl's pragmatism here: anything that does a job for the fiction, I'm in favour of.

Steph, I take your point about ownership: I just don't ever intend to wake up being owned by someone else – otherwise, why be a writer in the first place? The New Wave named itself (or stuck itself to the best label it could find from those on offer), not just for publicity purposes,

not just as a flag, but because to name yourself is to take responsibility for your ideas. That's a way to prevent commercialisation and carpet-bagging, especially now, when we're surrounded by middlemen who live by that kind of parasitism.

Henry: I so wholly agree with this: "I reckon that it's more useful to think of the New Weird as an argument. An argument between a bunch of writers who read each other, who sometimes influence each other, sometimes struggle against that influence. Who don't ever agree on what the New Weird is, on where it starts and stops, but are prepared to harangue each other about it. Describing the New Weird in these terms involves its own kind of codswallop, but at least it's a less constricting kind of codswallop."

Jonathan: you're right, of course, there was deliberate mischief-making in both my posts; and, yes, it was designed to get us all baying at one another; and yes, I wish to God we could have our cake and eat it. This whole process is as undignified as hell, especially right at the start of something that might get no further but which has to describe itself (and thus nurture itself) somehow.

Justina: Speaking of carpetbagging from the mainstream, I think you're absolutely right, and that a big convulsion is in the offing. We need to take the advantage and get our act together, certainly. But I'm not as convinced as you that we'll lose. (After all, we have Battleship Miéville.) It's up to us, as individuals and as sharers of some labelled or unlabelled umbrella, to make ourselves as strong and feisty as possible. There *will* be a melting pot, at some level, although personally I think it will take the form of a steadily-enlarging slipstream. Up to us to allow for that and see it as an opportunity, not a defeat. To be honest, I'm in favour. The prospect shakes me out of my old guy's lethargy. I'm ready to swim or drown…

Strahan: Hey Mike. You win. Just used "new weird" in a book review. Let's do a definitive anthology to celebrate!

Harrison: OK Jonathan. Now, what shall we call it…

Strahan: Why The New Weird, of course. Or maybe Odd Worlds: The Best of the New Weird…So the next obvious question is, who are the new weirdoes? We have China and Jeff and…

Morgan: Thank you Jonathan, that's exactly the question I need answered for my Wiscon panel. (And you have the two names I have.) Suggestions would be appreciated. By the way, I have suggested to Wiscon that "New Weird" be used in the panel title.

Harrison: Hi Jonathan. I think naming names would be making rather too much mischief, for me, at present. The Wiscon panel Cheryl mentioned will surely produce a list we can all argue over. Instead I've been mulling over Justina's point above, trying to match it to my own sense that something is happening here (but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?) which I see as really quite new in the history of the ghetto's relationship with the mainstream. As Justina says: it's a science world now, & they're just waking up to that out there, also how to speak about it, or let it speak itself through you.

This is in a way a development from the highly fashionable science & the arts movement which has been going on in other disciplines since the mid 90s (and of which we, bless our little cotton socks, though we're clear inheritors of that label, have taken no advantage at all). Part of the problem there is that we have taken absolutely no part in the discussions, and never insisted on having a place in things. You can't expect people to come to you in this life, and if you don't make moves of your own, you can hardly complain if things seem to change very suddenly around you in a way you weren't prepared for. I was sitting in on informal meetings on the South Bank in 1997/8: everyone else there was a scientist or someone in the plastic arts…This point extends further. Life in the West now is a crossply of fantasies. Because we understand fantasy from the inside, we're the people to write about that, too. It seems to me that as a result we should open this front of the struggle-to-name, the front that faces out from the ghetto, with a certain confidence.

I'm aware here that I'm not talking directly about the New Weird, & that I've bundled it with Brit SF. Deliberately, because I see them both as

responses – or not quite that, probably some better word – to the same situation, which is the increasing convergence of concerns between literary mainstream fiction and f/sf. Thus back to Justina's point: they are soon going to be tackling exactly the same subjects as us. I don't think we can beat them, in the sense of taking them on directly; but I don't think we have to. I'm in favour of a melting pot – in fact I think it already exists, partly because "slipstream" has been quietly doing just that for a whole new generation of readers who are as happy with [my collection] *Travel Arrangements* as with a David Mitchell novel – although I'm very aware that both China and Justina have different views here. All of this concerns me more than how the new developments in f/sf represented by China, Al Reynolds, Justina, myself, et al, face *inwards* into the genre. I suspect that may become in some sense irrelevant.

So I'm less interested in filling the contents list of an inward-facing collection, than in wondering how we organise and present ourselves when we face outwards. How we capitalise on the out-there response to [China Miéville's] *The Scar* or [my own] *Light*, or the fact that the broadsheets review pages are so suddenly interested in us all. What concerns me is who, in the New Weird, etc., is capable of speaking outwards with confidence, not inwards.

"New Weird": I Think We're the Scene

MICHAEL CISCO

LITERARY HISTORY is heavily invested in scenes and schools, portable assemblies (Surrealists, Romantics, Beats) put together by critics. Hindsight naturally makes this assembling work easier, at least in part because the mill of arguments will have ground to a halt (it's easier to snapshot a stationary object), and the vast profusion of determinative details that are so easily missed and which no one point of view, I think, can encompass, have been forgotten. Arguments about the meaning of a movement are any movement's primary content, regarded as something bigger than the sum of its parts; the questions and answers, the political map of positions, usually turn out to be more important than any resolution posited at the time, or, to put it better, those resolutions in the moment, rather than eliminating questions or arguments, join them in a general manifold. Trying to name and adequately describe the scene as it unfolds in the present is like cutting cookies out of the fog, but perhaps that irreducible vagueness should encourage people to try.

Now there is the sense of a trend, loosely identified with a heterogeneous company of writers as varied in their works as China Miéville and Jeffrey VanderMeer. For the sake of keeping ourselves in circulation, we might provisionally describe this as a tendency toward more literarily sophisticated fantasy. In bookstores, *Fantasy* means the Piers Anthony/J. R. R. Tolkien section; the word is an abbreviation for a standard content, like a brand. *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Alice in Wonderland*, *The Golden Ass*, *Gulliver's Travels* or *Naked Lunch* are not shelved there,

although they are all fantasies. This has everything to do with selling books, making sure the buyer finds what he or she is looking for, and reflects no judgment with regard to the literary status of this or that work of fantasy. A certain amount of work is produced specifically for the purpose of stocking shelves in the *Fantasy* section, where the index of novelty is best kept low. The serendipitous constellation of contemporary fantasy writers that belong to or generate the "New Weird" seem generally and in varying proportions to blend the influences of genre writing and literary fantasy, and to weave in non-fantastic signals as well.

Poetry restores language by breaking it, and I think that much contemporary writing restores fantasy, as a genre of writing in contrast to a genre of commodity or a section in a bookstore, by breaking it. Michael Moorcock revived fantasy by prying it loose from morality; writers like Jeff VanderMeer, Stepan Chapman, Lucius Shepard, Jeffrey Ford, Nathan Ballingrud are doing the same by prying fantasy away from pedestrian writing, with more vibrant and daring styles, more reflective thinking, and a more widely broadcast spectrum of themes.

Every year *The New Yorker* releases its new fiction issue, profiling the important new writers, and every year they get it mostly wrong. An inessential, NPR tepidness prevails, and this is plainly not where it's at. Lucius Shepard's *A Handbook of American Prayer* is where it's at. *Handbook*, *Veniss Underground*, *The Troika*, *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque*, *The Etched City*, *My Work Is Not Yet Done* are not examples of good fantasy writing or good genre writing, but they are examples of good writing. Fantasy writing is no more inherently inessential than any other variety, and no more inherently escapist, either. What makes writing escapist is not a matter of whether or not it involves magic but whether or not it involves something meaningful. Fantasy writing is if anything increasingly relevant because it involves building and representing the whole world, fantasy worlds, sci-fi worlds, hidden Gnostic horror worlds. This proliferation of worlds seems to me to be bound up with the extent to which the world has become immersed in trademarked representation.

The New Weird, as I've said, is a topic for critics and not so much for

writers. Nothing could be more unenlightening or useless than a New Weird manifesto. What strikes the observer is precisely the spontaneity with which so many different writers, pursuing such obviously disparate literary styles, should vaguely intersect in this way. Instead of a set of general aims, we have a great proliferation of correspondences on a more intimate level, like a sprawling coincidence of idiosyncratic choices. Mapping out a scheme won't yield us much insight into what's going on, although it might add something interesting of its own. The richness of this new writing recommends a depth-diving model rather than a breadth-sweeping one, such that none of its variety or perversion is planned out. The writing in question is more extensively and usefully defined by the unconscious or spontaneous choices the authors are making than by the directed ones; maybe this is most often the case. Certainly, none of the writers thus far invoked have, to my knowledge, set out to be New Weird writers, in the way that André Breton et al set out to be Surrealists.

Why pronunciations and definitions, if not to elicit counter claims? Sometimes it seems as though the winners in these matters prevail more as a consequence of sheer exhaustion, which can mean a depletion of the store of endurance but just as readily of the store of interest, so that the received definition of any given wave is the final score in a game called on account of rain and indefinitely, maybe permanently, postponed thereafter. The New Weird has come into being, such as it is and whatever it should be, on its own and not by dint of any decision or program, so the attribution of decisions and schemes to it ought to be seen as prescriptions rather than as descriptions. This is only a problem if the prescription is mistaken for a description, that is to say, X, precisely because he believes the New Weird is such and such, doesn't say this is what it "should be," he says rather "this is what it is."

It's not as though literature preserves a province unto itself, and that genre stands in compartments below the level of general literature. All works of literature will express characteristics of genre. In his prologue to *The Invention of Morel*, by Adolfo Bioy Casares, Borges touches on the tendency to disparage the adventure story, the mystery story, and contrasts them to the "formless" modern psychological novel. The

formless psychological novel is a genre which, more so at the time in which Borges was writing and somewhat less so now, ascended to preeminence on the smoldering remains of other genres. It may be that, in order to exist, genres may engage in a weird disembodied war that cannot be entirely explained in market or in aesthetic terms. More likely, this war is a blind for something more frankly political.

The distinction between genre literature and general literature is bogus, at least in any non-colloquial sense of these terms. What is "general literature"? If we begin to define it, even assuming this definition can be uncontroversial, we are already outlining tendencies or rules which are indistinguishable in kind from those that are used to define genre literature. The distinction between genre and general is an evaluation from the outset, and not an innocent differentiation. The New Weird might be better defined as a refusal to accept this evaluation of imaginative literature, whatever form it may take. So it is not for reasons of influence alone that such authors as Borges, Calvino, Angela Carter are invoked by many of those in the imaginative camp, but also because these authors are obviously both fantastic and literary. Each after their own fashion, as you would expect.

Tracking Phantoms

DARJA MALCOLM-CLARKE

WHEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT the New Weird, it's almost as though they are talking about a ghost. Some have seen it, some are open to the possibility. Others are non-believers. All manner of discussions have cropped up around the question of whether or not something called New Weird actually exists. Does the name describe an emergent subgenre? Is it (merely) a coincidental proliferation of a kind of speculative fiction? Or is it a mass hallucination created by a constituency hungry for yet another way to categorize fiction? Regardless of the answers to these questions, the effect New Weird has had on the genre fiction community is undeniable.

However, I should say that on one level, to me personally, it doesn't much matter whether the New Weird is "real" or not – the New Weird as an idea led me to a set of texts I might not have otherwise pursued. I wouldn't be the same reader, writer, or scholar if I hadn't read New Weird fiction. I daresay the genre fiction field wouldn't be the same, either, if the New Weird movement or "moment" hadn't happened. For me, it changed the kinds of questions I ask about literature and the kinds of things I want from literature; it served as a partial guide to what I wanted to do in my *own* fiction; and it changed what I thought I could get from a book.

I first came to the New Weird as a graduate student at Indiana University studying post-World War II science fiction. It happened by chance: I returned from a vacation to find that the SF Studies Reading Group I was part of had selected a text called *Perdido Street Station* for its

next read. I didn't know anything about the New Weird then, but I was so drawn into the milieu of *Perdido*, and the way it seemed to mix the aesthetics of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, while also admiring its use of language and style, that I was bowled over when I heard there was a "movement" of texts with somehow similar qualities. As I read more of this movement, I was captivated on every level at which I relate to books – as a critic, writer, and long-time speculative fiction reader.

These texts made me read like a kid again, voraciously, with glee. It was hard to resist the sheer fun of their myriad fantastical/pseudo-scientific contraptions, settings, and worldviews – the Fisherwives and Yardbulls in Paul Di Filippo's "A Year in the Linear City," which bear away the bodies of the recently dead; the parallel world called the Shift in Steph Swainston's *The Year of Our War*; the race of mushroom dwellers in Jeff VanderMeer's *City of Saints and Madmen*; Miéville's interdimensional Weaver in *Perdido* and the Possible Sword of *The Scar*.

All of those elements we could say defamiliarize the way we see our own world, and ask us to re-envision what we know about, or rather, how we conceptualize, the metaphysical makeup of our own world. They did it in a way that seemed somehow new even though their aesthetic struck me as vaguely familiar – it evoked H. P. Lovecraft's grotesque cosmology and the bizarre worldview produced through his sanity-shattering elder gods.

But the grotesquerie of the New Weird wasn't the extreme cosmic horror of Lovecraft, or even of supernatural horror, but one of *degree* – grotesquerie of exaggeration. New Weird had the sense of unease that is found in Horror, but that unease wasn't resolved in a moment of terror. Instead, that grotesquerie was part of the secondary worlds' aesthetic as a whole. It could be seen in elements like the Festival of the Freshwater Squid and in the Living Saint of *City of Saints*, for instance; in the mangled bodies of the Remade and the physical squalor and moral degradation of New Crobuzon in Miéville's Bas-Lag texts; the presence of Insects, with their mindless consumption of living beings, the Tines' "creative mutilation," and the Vermiform worm-girl in *The Year of Our War*; and the living animal amalgamations and rampant deformity of stillborn children borne of an entire city gone awry in *The Etched*

City. These elements mirror an aesthetic that can be found in Mervyn Peake's first two *Gormenghast* novels…novels that had a particular preoccupation with cultural issues like the monolithic burden of tradition, and the essence of authority.

Indeed, the grotesquerie in these texts seems to be related to the texts' socio-political milieu. More specifically, it seems in some cases to focus upon the corporeality – the very bodies – of the characters. The Remade of the Bas-Lag novels, the dwarf-manta ray from *City of Saints*, the immortal and multiform Eszai and dreamlike animal denizens of the drug-induced Shift in *The Year of Our War*, Gwynn as a basilisk and Beth as a sphinx in *The Etched City*…

The question arises, why is grotesquerie such a prominent element in these texts, and why is there a proliferation of these characters with strange bodily forms? Speculative fiction is replete with weird corporealities, of course – ghosts, aliens, cyborgs, monsters of all sorts – and probably all of them could be seen as "weird." But in New Weird texts, characters' bodies appear in a grotesque mode – and this changes the way we respond to them. We can't read those grotesque bodies in the same way as we do bodies that register as "normal."

What is the grotesque? For one thing, it's an aesthetic register that unsettles. Consider gargoyles, Medusa, Frankenstein's monster, the alien in the movies of the same name. The out-and-out blood and guts of some kind of splatter-oriented horror suggests anxiety about or the attempt to come to grips with death. But the grotesque points to something else entirely, something more subtle. It's an unease that suggests our way of classifying the world into knowable parts doesn't get the job done; it is, ultimately, *confusion*, because the different parts of something don't make sense together (Harpham xv). The grotesque demonstrates that there are things for which we do not have categories, and, therefore, that our ways of making meaning are artificial.

If the grotesque is part of the New Weird's overall aesthetic, how does it inflect or affect the stories' content? The grotesque in these texts seems to be inviting a particular reading of the texts' events, characters, or socio-political backdrop (depending on the text). Many are set

in urban spaces populated by physically weird, aesthetically grotesque characters. These two elements – bodies and cities – play a dominant roll in the stories' symbolic or visual vocabulary. In fact, many of the stories themselves establish a connection between bodies and cities: in *Iron Council*, the Remade had to get out of New Crobuzon to found a city where they could live free of tyranny; Dvorak the dwarf is tattooed with an image of Ambergris, and later becomes a manta-ray that somehow *is* the city, come to reclaim the man called X, in *City of Saints*; images of Gwynn's body torn asunder populate Beth's artwork more and more as Gwynn's role in promoting slavery in Ashamoil increases; and in *The Year of Our War*, the city of Epsilon can be accessed only through death or a hallucinogenic drug, and is the origin of the Insects that terrorize the Fourlands. Broadly speaking, within the symbolic vocabulary of the texts, cities seem to stand for the overarching power or social structure, and a reading – often a critique – of those structures can be seen in the grotesquerie of the characters' corporeality. Whether power structures are tyrannical, totalitarian, corrupt, godless – these texts use the grotesque to evoke a particular response about the way society is organized. In these texts, the grotesque points out the artificiality of unjust social structures.

And that, I'd suggest, is one of the strengths of the New Weird, at least in those texts that draw on the grotesque: with its apparent interest in the urban and the corporeal as an arena for power struggle, alongside its weird aesthetic, the New Weird seems to have a built-in faculty for social critique (or access to it, in any case).

One of speculative fiction's great abilities is to defamiliarize our own world so that we can better see it – and the New Weird has a way of foregrounding how the social terrain operates and affects everyday people. Within this equation of grotesque mode/urban focus, the New Weird presents a platform for addressing all sorts of issues – class (see Bishop's *The Etched City*), racism (see "Dradin, In Love" in *City of Saints*), imperialism (see Miéville's "The Tain"). In this sense, New Weird is one of the most radical phantoms yet to haunt fantasy literature.

Despite this possible radicalism, it is worth noting that one area hasn't been much explored within the texts being called New Weird:

the interrogation of gender and sexuality. For instance, the New Weird could function as a framework for interrogating the discursive production of masculinity and femininity as exaggerations (enter: the grotesque) of sexual dimorphism, issues of power and the body, gendered social inequality, assumptions about normative sexuality and gender – all of these issues could be productively explored or interrogated through a New Weird mode. It will be interesting to see if, in future years, feminist writers find the New Weird mode a productive space in which to undertake their work.

Another characteristic of the New Weird texts is the mix and medley of fantasy, horror, and science fiction genres. New Weird texts often take place in extensively developed secondary worlds governed by metaphysics more magical than scientific – the stuff of fantasy – even though they are presented as the latter, the stuff of science fiction. See, for instance, the inter-dimensional paralyzing "oneirochromatophores" of the slake-moths' wings in *Perdido*, and the magic aether of Ian R. MacLeod's *The Light Ages*, which is the keystone of this alternate-history England's economy. This particular blend of genres, cast so often within a grotesque aesthetic, simultaneously seems new and harks back to the "weird" fiction of the early twentieth century, before the genres had emerged or coalesced into the forms as we know them today.

This parallels a current overarching impulse in speculative fiction – the speculative literary mode seems to be undergoing an upheaval, or at least a persistent interrogation, of genre boundaries. We can see this in the increasing popularity of slipstream, which obscures the boundaries between speculative and mimetic (realistic) literature. And we can see it as well in the Interstitial Arts movement, which is interested in cross-pollination, as they say, between the different arts. It's not just speculative fiction – scholar Brian McHale suggests that since the 1950s, there has been influence back and forth between mimetic/mainstream literature and science fiction…although for the first couple decades, each was looking not at contemporary but older phases of the other. They finally caught up with each other – both started looking at contemporary manifestations of the other – in the 1970s or so (228). Today, this back-and-forth influence is visible in contemporary mimetic fiction like

that of Thomas Pynchon and William Burroughs, Angela Carter, and in Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada*, as McHale points out, and I'd suggest also Kurt Vonnegut and Don DeLillo – and others besides. Perhaps cross-pollination can also be seen between fantasy and mainstream literatures in the work of Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, in Gabriel García Márquez's magical realism, and in works such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, to name a very few. Mainstream and speculative fictions are merging to where some points overlap. I believe the New Weird is an example of that process. More specifically, the New Weird constitutes a unique moment or position in which overlapping speculative genres also overlap with mainstream literature.

So, to me, the New Weird represents a productive experiment in fantasy fiction. The New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s arguably embodied science fiction's claim to literary "seriousness." This desire for seriousness is not snobbery, as sometimes suggested by folks who overemphasize the entertainment function of speculative fiction; it's about recognition of the vast possibilities within the field. To this end, one thing that has been productive about the New Weird is its salient critical function (and the attention to style and quality of writing certainly does not hurt). This is not to say, of course, that fantasy before this point had no critical function, or inspired writing, for that matter – fantasy has always been as capable as mainstream fiction of being serious-minded, contemplative, artful, and visionary. Rather, what is useful here for fantasy as a literature is the conversation New Weird has incited about the critical role fantasy can play, if its readers and writers choose, and the genre's capacity for creative brilliance. True, the conversation about New Weird has turned some people off for various reasons; but in the meantime, for others, I think it's expanded what we as a community *say* fantasy can do. It's about the narrative of this genre, not the actuality of it.

That's why, in once sense, it doesn't matter if the New Weird "actually" exists – whether it's just a rogue chill breeze raising goosebumps, or whether there really is a phantom rattling the windows and making discomfiting noises here. Because of the conversation surrounding its possible existence, the New Weird has changed the speculative fiction

landscape, widened the horizons – a lot or a little depending on where you're standing. For this reason, I expect this particular phantom will continue to haunt the literary landscape for a long time to come.

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Whose Words You Wear

K. J. BISHOP

THERE IS no doubt some advantage to be had from labelling fiction under rubrics of genre, period, style, and all else that helps a reader find, on the shelves of a bookstore, something to their taste. But there are disadvantages, too, for both reader and writer, the chief of these being, I think, that a label invites a particular reading of the work and discourages other readings. If we are told that a book is Modernist we will most likely read it through a filter made of our knowledge of Modernism. That filter may be useful, and even quite necessary to an understanding of the writer's methods. However, we might be so satisfied with our view of how the book sits in the Modernist canon that we don't think about where else it might fit. A minute's thought about the bookshelves of literature, as opposed to those of bookshops, tells us that they are not simply linear. They are more like the London Underground or Paris Metro, only more complex by orders of magnitude, with books sitting at many-rayed junctions of theme, genre, style, intention, idea… and the taxonomic mind, however exact and exhaustive it tries to make its labels, is not looking at dinosaur bones or mineral specimens, however much it wishes it were. It is working in conditions perfused with the subjectivity that attends all understanding of all art, so it ought not to be too cocky about the labels it comes up with.

The label on the front of this volume, "New Weird," rather obviously tells readers to expect something new and weird. But since both terms are relative, readers may not find their expectations of either fulfilled.

This is a problem with all genre labels. The horror story someone read was not horrific enough, the fantasy was not fantastical enough, the science fiction romance novel was not romantic enough or not science fictional enough – then the taxonomist steps in and tries to make things better. I admit my instinct is to see the taxonomist as a ludicrous figure. However, one hears what he has to say about the reading of the label "fantasy," to use the example of that immense genre into which much of the so-called New Weird fits. "Fantasy" has become associated in many people's minds with stories and themes that are very *familiar* – the bildungsroman, the war story, the quest ordained to succeed, all decorated with trappings of magic and miracle that paradoxically lose their strangeness when placed in a world where they are known and understood; it has come to be attended by readerly expectations of certain fixes, notably of immersion in a diverting secondary world, wish-fulfillment, and vicarious power-tripping. It therefore might not be entirely useless for a writer whose fantasies are of a different sort to accept, however charily, a label that suggests the *unfamiliar*, if only to reduce the chance of disappointing readers' expectations.

This acceptance, though, is very different from holding the label in one's bosom. Some writers in this book may feel a sense of personal allegiance to the New Weird; others may feel quite ho-hum about it. There is no New Weird manifesto. Definitions and bibliographies of the New Weird have been made by a fluid, unofficial committee of Adams, few of whom would, I think, erect a barrier inscribed with "Here Be the New Weird; Yonder Be Naught but the Old Ordinary." It's a fuzzy label, really, its very relativity a nod in deference to the difficulty of labelling literature.

But the label exists and I have set myself the task of tackling it a little, so to the "New", which a reading *contra* something old, whatever that might be – and Ecclesiastes comes to mind. Literature is a product of its influences. We all riff off something, work against a certain background, mine a vein of thought or style to which somebody else showed us the way. So what is the Old against which the New Weird sets itself? Every writer in this book would probably have a different answer. I'm inclined to say, firstly, hang on – wasn't "Make it new!" a Modernist

catch-cry, and didn't Postmodernism remind us that we've been living in a pile of bric-a-brac since a month or two, give or take, after we came down from the trees?

Perhaps the only sensible and seemly reply is to say that you're trying to make a semblance of newness out of the bric-a-brac. (I feel Jerry Cornelius leering over my shoulder – but Jerry wanted more than semblance, I now remember.) Eclecticism, writerly text, non-linear structures attempt to introduce into fantasy species of narrative not native to the genre, defamiliarisation of the ordinary and insertion of the ordinary into the fantastic, and, I would argue, a tendency to thin or vandalise the fourth wall while generally, though not always, stopping short of knocking it down, are all common features of texts found under the New Weird rubric; however, these tactics are not new, nor have they rusted in a cupboard since the heyday of the British New Wave (writers including Richard Calder, Jonathan Carroll, Iain M. Banks and Hugh Cook come to mind), nor were they even new then.

Another reason to be suspicious of "New" is the very good one that binary oppositions are always suspect. New is young, alive, snappy; old is senile, incontinent, annoying. Alarms go off at this point: one does well to be careful and not be arrogant. Personally, I don't set myself against any writer, style or theme. I consider myself an enthusiastic fan and disciple of many writers, alive and dead. If I have a fogey bogey it's a bogey in the form of a word, namely the word "should." How many times does one hear "A novel should be…" "Characters should be…" "A plot should…" "A sentence should…"? Once, in fact, is too often. The art world has discarded "should," but the mass-market economics which support the writing world, and probably, too, the time investment literature requires of readers, make such a casting off, on a large scale, much more difficult. Much so-called New Weird fiction, however, doesn't – it seems to me – pay much mind to "should." By dint of that, perhaps something new has come or will come; but even if not, by casting off "should" one at least removes an impediment to the growth, if such is possible, of new narratives and new myths.

As I read over this essay, which does not seem very well-jointed to me, I remember that it is very hard to analyse a phenomenon from within

it, and while it is still alive and changing; still, it seems a better idea to have a go at it yourself than leave it to other people to decide for you, after you're dead and can't say it wasn't that at all.

European Editor Perspectives on the New Weird

SHORT ESSAYS BY MARTIN ŠUST, MICHAEL HAULICA, HANNES RIFFEL, JUKKA HALME, AND KONRAD WALEWSKI

IN OUR TRAVELS IN 2006 throughout Europe, we found many "echoes" of New Weird, and many different ways in which it worked as a stimulus to both publishing and other writers. For this reason, we asked editors from the Czech Republic, Romania, Germany, Finland, and Poland to respond to questions about New Weird, with the results published herein as short essays. —THE EDITORS

Martin Šust, editor, anthologist, and writer

CZECH REPUBLIC

As foreign rights assistant and book editor at Laser Books, Martin Šust runs imprints such as New Weird and New Space Opera. He serves as the editor-in-chief of the Czech edition of THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION *and also works for the Czech SF/F magazine* PEVNOST. *In addition to editing three New Weird anthologies, he has edited an anthology of British New Space Opera called* THE FIRES OF STARS, *with an American volume called* THE DUST OF STARS *scheduled for next year. He has won nine awards from the Czech Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror. Šust can be contacted at* martin.sust@seznam.cz.

"CREATING NEW WEIRD TO WORK FOR US"

I believe that the New Weird movement started as a provocation, and a good one, but its success may have scared the creators themselves. Several great internet discussions caused a big stir by asking questions

like "Is there really such a movement?" with many different answers. But in the end, however, there was only *one* real answer: "Maybe!"

"Maybe!" is good enough for publishers and readers because genre fiction *needs* movements – real ones or fake ones, it doesn't matter. Especially since there haven't been any movements for twenty years, and everyone knows that we need some great movement every twenty years – the *Golden Age* with changes in the vein of J. W. Campbell; *New Wave* with struggles against the taboos, led by Michael Moorcock and Harlan Ellison; *Cyberpunk* where science fiction cross-pollinated the old approaches with new ideas, a la William Gibson and Bruce Sterling; and, finally, *New Weird* with its crossing genres and fighting spirit a la China Miéville. All movements need only to urge readers and writers toward change while containing strong personalities to start off.

So we have *something like* a movement and years pass. Now we can judge: Is it something like a real movement or not? And damned if the answer remains only "Maybe!" There are some strong arguments for both sides of this issue, and we all know them. But for me, as an editor (and forgive me for being so outspoken), there is only one important thing: It seems that the readers are grateful for the chance to read something fresh and new, something that isn't boring like ordinary fantastic literature. With authors like China Miéville, Ian R. MacLeod, Steph Swainston, K. J. Bishop, Jeff VanderMeer, Hal Duncan, or Jay Lake, we created an imprint (and two anthologies) full of new ideas and new attitudes. Maybe it's not really *new* for fantastic literature, but it *is* new for our readers. Yes, maybe we only *want* to see the connections between these authors and nothing like New Weird actually exists, but here in the Czech Republic we now have an imprint of great titles (all with covers by British art genius Edward Miller) – and, for us, this is one big and unforgettable result of New Weird.

For the first time we can publish very good fiction in one great book line, with the most successful titles helping the others. The result? All of the books in this line have sold well, meaning we can branch out and buy a few experimental titles as well. For the first time also we have something interesting enough to attract a foreign artist, and with his helpfulness we have created something really extraordinary in the "look" of the

books. For the first time we, as a small foreign publisher, can compete on equal terms with the American market and publish not only commercial bestsellers, but really interesting titles too.

How do we pick books for our New Weird line? Every book must have something more than cross-genre leanings (science fiction, fantasy and horror). Every book must do more than attempt to create a story with the use of techniques more common to mainstream literature (like surreal visions for example). It must have a truly unique spirit and the desire to create something both good and new. These are qualities you see in the works of such New Weird predecessors like Gene Wolfe, Mervyn Peake, or M. J. Harrison. I realize that what I've detailed may still seem too general, especially since I have to convey them in a foreign language, but such difficulties are at the heart of the issues with the New Weird movement itself.

All of this success and interest has helped in other, tangential ways as well – like creating a Czech edition of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, for example. It has also forced other Czech publishing houses to make room for books by fresh new fantasy writers like Daniel Abraham, Elizabeth Bear, Tobias Buckell, Alan Campbell, Scott Lynch, Joe Abercrombie, David Marusek, Cory Doctorow, and Charles Stross. Perhaps even more importantly, we can also publish special editions of anthologies containing work by foreign newcomers who don't even have books published in the Czech Republic.

This is the only true answer to the question. For us, it isn't "Maybe!" For us, the New Weird movement exists. Maybe it doesn't exist in the United States or Great Britain, but we have our own version in Czech Republic – we've created it to work for us.

Michael Haulica, editor-in-chief, Tritonic Publishing Group

ROMANIA

In addition to his work for Tritonic, Michael Haulica is editor-in-chief for the FICTION.RO *magazine and a decorated writer who was Romania's Man of the Year in Romanian SF&F for 2005. Haulica has had over fifty short stories and novellas published in Romanian, English, Danish, Croatian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Australian magazines. Haulica has also written*

several award-winning books while also writing columns on genre fiction for two of the most important Romanian literary magazines

"THE NEW WEIRD TREACHERY"

For me, New Weird is science fiction, fantasy, and horror mixed together, with a literary approach. That's why the New Weird authors transcend the genres and anger the "hardcore" fans, especially the fans of any genre who feel they and their devotion have been betrayed by these authors. In the meantime, New Weird authors seem to forge greater alliances with "mainstream readers" – those who usually don't read genre fiction but do read these weird tales because they are extremely well-written, like any other kind of "high literature."

Therefore New Weird novels are the literary shuttles between two worlds: genre and mainstream. They form first contact expeditions, and, in some cases, the second and third contacts come soon after.

New Weird is also a literature for twenty-first-century readers written by the real twenty-first-century writers. This is true even if the history of New Weird has roots in the last hundred years in H. P. Lovecraft's works, H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau (1896)*, Adolfo Bioy Casares's *La invención de Morel (1940),* and many other writers who lived with the consciousness that the world is a very weird place.

In Romania, New Weird has taken genre literature from the "genre ghetto" and given it to a larger audience. After I published China Miéville's New Crobuzon Trilogy, the first in a book line without Science Fiction, Fantasy, or Horror as a label on the covers (a trend continued with M. John Harrison's *Viriconium* omnibus), many "mainstream readers" began to read our science fiction and fantasy books. After that, it was easier for us to publish and attract readers for Jeff VanderMeer's *Veniss Underground* and K. J. Bishop's *The Etched City.* Readers who enjoyed this "first contact" then moved on to books by Geoff Ryman, Kelly Link or Roger Zelazny.

This New Weird movement in Romania followed another Romanian movement in the mid-nineties. Readers and critics referred to me and other writers from this period as the "cyberpunk generation." However, it wasn't really "cyberpunk," in that the cyberpunk motives, attitudes,

and technology were wedded to distinctly Romanian touches in terms of historical and mythic touchstones. Now, ten years later, I call it "technopunk fantasy." For example, we have created a weird being, the *motocentaur*, half-human, half-Harley Davidson (or any other motorcycle brand), writing fantasy like cyberpunk. These were good times for authors like Danut Ivanescu, Don Simon, Sebastian A. Corn, and me.

At the moment, the nearest thing to a New Weird Romanian author is Costi Gurgu, who recently published a novel called *Retetarium*, about a fantasy world where the supreme goal in anyone's life is to be a Master of Cooking Recipe Receipts. The author lives now in Canada, and I hope he will be published soon in English. He is a unique addition to the field, in my opinion.

However, all in all, I don't think there's a difference between the Romanian approach and the general New Weird. We are all writers in the same world. Sometimes a Weird World. Like our novels.

Hannes Riffel, acquiring editor, Klett-Cotta

GERMANY

Hannes Riffel was born in the black forest, Southwest Germany, in 1966 and has been running a SF/F/H *bookshop for fifteen years now. He has translated, among others, Sean Stewart, Bruce Sterling, Hal Duncan, and John Clute and edited, again among others, German editions of stories and novels by Robert A. Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, Ursula K. Le Guin, Jeff VanderMeer, Mark Z. Danielewski and Maureen F. McHugh. He is the editor of* PANDORA *magazine and lives with his wife, the translator/editor Sara Riffel, in East Berlin.*

"THERE IS NO NEW WEIRD"

We do not have anything like the New Weird in Germany. Europe may be culturally dominated by the United States, but that does not mean that we are on the same level of theoretical debate. Most of the important English-language writers get translated (China Miéville, Jeff VanderMeer, Hal Duncan), but there is little reflection going on about whether they are different and in what way. One of the laudable exceptions is Ralf Reiter, whose essays in the Heyne SF Jahrbuch display a

sharp eye for literary evolution, and some articles published in Franz Rottensteiner's Quarber Merkur.

This may have something to do with why, for me, the New Weird is not a certain form or *school* of literature, but a gut feeling. As a bookseller and genre editor I have to read so much cliché fiction, that every time I discover something special, something that goes against the grain, the butterflies in my stomach go wild. It may be a useful description that those butterflies buzz around the work of China Miéville, and that they get excited in a certain way while I read Jeff VanderMeer, Steph Swainston or Hal Duncan. But they get excited as well when I read Elizabeth Hand or Kelly Link, and I would not consider those two ladies as being part of any kind of New Weird.

To be honest, I never thought New Weird existed at all. I felt the same way about Cyberpunk: some guys and gals wrote stuff that was different, referenced from each other, broke rules in a way that at least from the outside looked similar. But in the end Cyberpunk is only useful to highlight a certain development in the history of Science Fiction. We can talk or write about the way *Snow Crash* took its password from *Neuromancer, Accelerando* from *Snow Crash,* and so on.

Names like New Weird and Cyberpunk are just that: names. As a bookseller I try to find out what people like and get them turned on to books of the same ilk – which is mostly like set theory, where you have to find out what goes together. To my mind naming things just pigeonholes them, and no one wants that to happen with a story or a book they've written. As I do not earn my money writing academic papers (although I've taught at university, so I know what it's all about), I try to stay away from compartmentalizing things.

Even if New Weird does exist, from a publisher's standpoint, it isn't healthy in Germany. Miéville does not sell too well here, and the fact that he's published by a mass market house with no record of quality translations does not help either. He gets some recognition from fans, and there's some interest in possible predecessors like *Gormenghast* or *Viriconium*. But, all in all, editors like me still have to go out on a very long limb to publish people like VanderMeer or Duncan. Germany has a tradition of not recognizing fantastic literature as such if it is labeled

high literature. Books published by major literary houses, from García Márquez to Susanna Clarke, are widely praised, but not because of their opposition to realism. Right now I am ushering *House of Leaves* into print, and we are doing our best not to market it as horror, god forbid! This is, of course, a postmodern novel which only makes use of…*you know what*.

As for homegrown talent that might buy in to the New Weird tradition, there seems to be none in the German language. As much as science fiction seems to be slowly reaching the same level as in the United States of the 1960s, the writers of fantasy stick so close to Tolkien you can hear their orkish ears grind, while the darker writers still chew up Lovecraft. I may have missed someone out of the mainstream, and I do not want to be unjust; but even the better story writers – Malte Sembten, Michael Siefener, Boris Koch – have not yet spread their wings and left the shadow of tradition. Hopefully, someday they will….

Jukka Halme, freelance editor and critic

FINLAND

Jukka Halme has been active in Finnish fandom for many years, and headed up the organization of Finncon 2006. In addition to writing for many publications, he recently edited an anthology of primarily American and English "New Weird" writers called New Weird? Halme appears regularly in TAHTIVAELTAJA*, one of Finland's finest genre publications.*

"BLURRING THE LINES"

In my 2006 anthology titled *Uuskummaa?* (*New Weird?*) published by Kirjava, I wrote the following definition of New Weird in the introduction:

> New Weird is a form of speculative fiction that tries to blur the borders between various genres (science fiction, fantasy, horror, mainstream, etc.) while aiming for a more literate style of writing.… It is an idea of fresh fantasy, sharing common ideas about mixing together various genres, politics, freedom from the clichés, and with an overwhelming tendency to play with the form. It

> wants to create something new, both linguistically and literally. It is not a movement per se, since when a movement takes shape it establishes itself, stops moving and thus changes into something academic – and New Weird stands for Change. It needs constant interaction between the Reader and the Writer as well as bold, new ideas.

How would my answer change today? Not by much. I like the idea of a loose literary "movement" that isn't too formulaic and set in stone. Therefore, no manifesto, even though it might be fun to have one, but more like general guidelines. I like New Weird as a tool with which to bind together great stories that share originality and are spontaneously different from anything else before written.

I'm not sure when the idea of this whole new fantasy that is more literary inclined, more daring and/or genre-free, came about, but I do remember that in early 2001 the genre fan and writer Gabe Chouinard wrote something about a revolution that was about to happen in the field of SF and fantasy. He called it the Next Wave and I realised I had been feeling the same rumblings for a while as well. It took me a few years to gather my thoughts, but in the end I was thinking that there isn't necessarily a single next Wave hitting the field, but *waves*. So many interesting old and new writers were doing en masse what probably many had been doing all the time alone, thus forming something that could be construed as a movement, like New Weird. A flood of great works came out during that time: *Perdido Street Station, Light, City of Saints and Madmen, The Etched City, The Physiognomy, Stranger Things Happen*, etc. And this "movement" is ongoing, if I think of New Weird as something that combines new, weird, innovative, ground-breaking, and border-breaking, well-written fantastic fiction – for example, Steph Swainston, Hal Duncan, Theodora Goss, Jay Lake, Nick Mamatas, Holly Phillips, M. Rickert, Sonya Taaffe, and Whoever-Else. Are they writing New Weird? Hell if I know, but I'd like to think so. Do new writers still break barriers? Do they write about important things, with style and verve and gusto? I would be seriously disappointed if not.

Are these writers creating, based on a common set of predecessors? To some extent, yes.

Personally, I like to think that Mervyn Peake is The Predecessor. *Gormenghast*, that brilliant baroque fantasy, combines the Weird from *Weird Tales* with absolute mastery of the language. One could argue about the importance of the original *Weird Tales* – authors like Lovecraft and the lot, or David Lindsay and Lord Dunsany – but to me the first among equals is Peake. He combines everything I see as New Weird in *Gormenghast*, especially with the first two parts. In a better world, Peake would be just as strong a fantasy-father in terms of sales as Tolkien.

As for the impact of New Weird, no one can say for certain, but I hope it *has* had an impact in the sense that it has brought more visibility to the writers labelled as such, preferably in a positive way. I think it has also had some level of influence on, for example, book design, with weirder and more original art replacing standard science fiction/fantasy images. I may be totally wrong here, but also I have this feeling that there hasn't been truly a proper appreciation for more literary fantasy before, other than with the exceptional works of the field. Would it be wrong to say that New Weird has changed the profile of fantasy? Could New Weird be used as a vehicle for marketing this Really Good Fantasy? Should one dismiss New Weird as a subgenre and just use it as a marketing tool for this Really Good Stuff?

In Finland, the impact has been moderate in terms of author popularity. Looking back for the past few years, nearly everything in genre fiction that could be described as New Weird has come from the small presses, including my own part of the "revolution": Jeff VanderMeer, Jonathan Carroll, Stepan Chapman, M. John Harrison, you're small press here, baby! (This seems to parallel the trend in the United States, in terms of the most innovative work coming from independent publishers like Small Beer, Subterranean, Ministry of Whimsy, Prime, through venues such as *Leviathan, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, Electric Velocipede* and *Fantasy*, just to name a few.)

However, in terms of an explosion of "New Weirdish" Finnish writing, a lot of the Finnish adult fantasy could well be described as New Weird:

Leena Krohn, Johanna Sinisalo, Pasi I. Jääskeläinen, Anne Leinonen and so on. There is a definite commonality of authors willing to break those shackling borderlines, and use the abundant possibilities of our own language in as varied and as rich a way as possible while seeking out new ideas, new taboos, and new territory. The same can be also said about writers for children and young adults, like Jukka Laajarinne and Sari Peltoniemi among others, who are constantly breaking the mould and creating something new and – well, again – weird.

Interestingly, a local literary movement rather like New Weird is being used as a label for works that aren't "really" SF and fantasy, but realism-fantasy ("reaalifantasia"). This doesn't translate well at all, as realism-fantasy definitely isn't about being Real Fantasy, but more about (and I'm paraphrasing here): "genre-free writing, that flows between mimesis and fantasy; only the ratio of how much mimesis or fantasy there is, varies." A bit like New Weird, I think, since they add: "Realism-fantasy operates strongly in the everyday reality, but is not afraid to use all those methods that are unfamiliar to Finnish realistic writers, such as magic realism, science fiction, fantasy, psychological thrillers, detective stories etc."

Finnish fiction in general tends to have a very strong flavour of its own, with deep-rooted distrust for things fantastical, unless they derive from the local mythology and folklore. Johanna Sinisalo's Finlandia Award-winning novel *Troll: A Love Story* dabbles there, New Weirdishly, between various genres and styles, but staying still very much Finnish.

New Weird as I see it out there is similar but different from our domestic form. Our New Weird is possibly a bit more toned down, more rooted into our Finnishness.

Konrad Walewski, acquiring editor, translator, scholar, and anthologist

POLAND

Konrad Walewski is a Polish scholar, specializing in Anglophone imaginative literature, literary critic, translator, anthologist, and, most recently, the editor-in-chief of the Polish edition of THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION. *He received an* M.A. *in English Studies from Maria*

Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland. For the last five years he taught various courses on American literature at the American Studies Center, Warsaw University, Warsaw, Poland. He has translated into Polish, novels and short stories by such authors as Pat Cadigan, John Crowley, Kelly Link, and many others. Since 2005 he has been editing annually the anthology of foreign imaginative fiction entitled KROKI W NIEZNANE (STEPS INTO THE UNKNOWN). *It is the continuation of the cult anthology series under this name edited by the Polish translator and editor Lech Jęczmyk and published back in the 1970s, which at that time was perhaps the only book-form presentation of Western science fiction in communist Poland.*

"THE UNCLEANED KETTLE"

It seems that, contrary to prevalent beliefs and fervent declarations, both critics and readers are fond of literary labels as a specific kind of currency; among its numerous functions a label allows us to perceive certain processes occurring within literature as a comfortable series of books to be read. I think that, paradoxically, it is more natural to label those artistic phenomena that achieve a substantial intensity, integrity and scale than to pretend that they are merely a whim or hoax aimed at guaranteeing recognition and sales of a handful of novels by a group of authors.

This said, I identify New Weird as a literary strategy, a way of thinking about writing and understanding imaginative fiction, and, above all, a way of practicing it, which has turned out to be innovative not at the level of narrative technique – there is not so much textual experimentation in it – but rather at the level of setting and characters. Constructing baroquely lush cityscapes and eclectic, astounding locations, filling them up with multicultural and multiethnic societies of humans, monsters, and all kinds of their hybrid forms, creating complex characters and subjecting them to the dilemmas of the world they live in – these are all characteristics of the New Weird practice. Not only did New Weird books transgress the generic limitations of science fiction, fantasy and horror, but, more significantly, emphasized the ongoing departure from the abused and exhausted Tolkienian heroic fantasy

mode. What is more, its unprecedentedly dynamic and alchemically brave genre amalgamation resulted in literary synergies of high originality and attractiveness such as those in the books by China Miéville, Steph Swainston, Jeff VanderMeer, or Jeffrey Ford. The need to come up with vibrant, memorable venues as well as original characters and creatures became New Weird's most noticeable attribute.

At the level of subject-matter it rejected many jaded fantasy tropes, including the clash of good and evil, and chose the exploration of such problems as otherness, alienation, and even from both in its physiological and existential dimension. I would like to quote at this point a short passage from William Gibson's *Idoru*:

> Lo told me a story once, about a job he'd had. He worked for a soup vendor in Hong Kong, a wagon on the sidewalk. He said the wagon had been in business for over fifty years, and their secret was that they'd never cleaned the kettle. In fact, they'd never stopped cooking the soup. It was the same seafood soup they'd been selling for fifty years, but it was never the same, because they added fresh ingredients every day, depending on what was available.

Even though Gibson's kettle can be perceived as a witty metaphor of literature in general, I believe that it is particularly relevant to New Weird, which was, or perhaps so still is, this "uncleaned kettle" of imaginative fiction; the writing whose freshness was to a large extent the result of unrestrained stirring in the kettle as well as joyous and vigorous putting into it any ingredients that were at hand. I am convinced therefore that it is this particular artistic strategy that is fundamental to New Weird.

However, I don't think that it still exists as a coherent literary movement aimed at provoking readers or attacking stale traditions, although I am convinced that some specific traits of New Weird will reverberate in works of both new and established writers. I actually count on New Weird as a source of inspiration and a strong influence for those who take up writing imaginative fiction. I also believe that the genre-mixing strategy – the methodical stirring in the uncleaned kettle of fantastic fic-

tion, putting more and more fresh ingredients and spices into the brew – exemplified by the New Weird will become a significant approach for future writers. Moreover, the necessity for writers to constantly widen their scope, employ vivid imagery, architectural lavishness, and physiological weirdness are as vital in creating imaginative fiction as narrative skills. Historically speaking, the New Wave revolution opened science fiction to mainstream writing with its variety of narrative techniques and literary traditions, the cyberpunk movement explored all kinds of technological concerns within neon-lit, infinite cityscapes, whereas, in my view, New Weird rediscovered fantastic fiction as an alchemical playground as well as re-established the necessity for a writer to concoct new, surprising formulae of imagined cities or empires and their inhabitants.

When viewed from the perspective of the category's distinctive features, I believe that at least two novels in Polish can be referred to and analyzed as New Weird since they have many similarities to the works of China Miéville, Jeff VanderMeer or Jeffrey Ford. These are *Inne pieśni* (*Other Songs*, 2003) by Jacek Dukaj and *Miasta pod Skałą* (*Cities Under the Rock*, 2005) by Marek S. Huberath. Both of them are highly impressive achievements of Polish fantastic fiction, brilliantly conceived and masterly executed, both are set in artistically vivid, highly original, and absorbingly unique worlds of their own.

However, one has to remember that what happened as a major literary movement in Britain and in the United States was merely a marginal phenomenon in Poland, or perhaps even something that merely coincided with what was happening in the West. I do not suppose that either Dukaj or Huberath attempted to follow anyone's footsteps, even though their novels operate within the same aesthetics and employ very similar artistic strategies to those of acclaimed New Weird authors.

I wish we were able to develop stronger and faster reactions to new literary trends as well as particular works of fiction, but, unfortunately, Poland, at many levels, is a slow-changing country, whose literary market is really peculiar and, to a large extent, conservative, and where readership is alarmingly slight compared, for instance, to that of our neighbor, the Czech Republic – a country with the population

nearly four times smaller than Poland's. By many it is still viewed as an inexplicable phenomenon that throughout the 1990s the bestselling authors in Poland were William Wharton (the author of *Birdy*, who at a certain point began to write exclusively for the Polish market) and Jonathan Carroll, while a huge number of both contemporary classics and the most interesting new books were not translated and published (China Miéville's novels have been gradually gaining recognition – *Iron Council* has not been published yet – while those of Jeffrey Ford or Jeff VanderMeer still wait for publication).

In spite of this, there is a group of writers who, in their short stories and novels, have begun to approach creating fictional, fantastic worlds and characters in a similar way to that of New Weird authors. I think that it is very promising, and that we are on the verge of a revolution in imaginative fiction which, hopefully, will bring more novels as original and important as those of Dukaj and Huberath.

LABORATORY

Festival Lives

THE NEW WEIRD ROUND ROBIN

PAUL DI FILIPPO, CAT RAMBO, SARAH MONETTE, DANIEL ABRAHAM, FELIX GILMAN, HAL DUNCAN, CONRAD WILLIAMS

WE COMMISSIONED this piece as a kind of laboratory experiment. Given a brief of coming up with a "New Weird" story, how would some of our finest fantasists generally not identified as "New Weird" interpret that brief? In a sense, we wanted them to show us their take on the term in fictional form. The result was never intended to be a complete story, although it definitely has closure. Di Filippo came up with the milieu and provided avenues for inspiration with his opening, after which each writer was asked to write about a particular element from Di Filippo's opening. The further brief was to advance the plot while also expanding on Di Filippo's milieu. (A conclusion created specifically for the internet by Di Filippo can be found on the Tachyon website at *www.tachyonpublications.com* on the page devoted to this anthology.) — THE EDITORS

VIEW 1

Death in a Dirty Dhoti | PAUL DI FILIPPO

THE TERRORIST got off the train amidst hundreds of other noisy pilgrims, all debarking into the cavernous, cast-iron columned interior of the Battidarmala station on Khunds Road.

The perfect cover, thought the killer, not for the first time, and as if to reassure himself. *Masquerading as a mindless worshipper of Chuzdt, during the locust god's own annual Festival. Millions of pilgrims flooding*

into immense Riarnanth. The city authorities abandoning all checks of papers. Vast crowds interposed between me and any pursuit. Mindless religious fervor obscuring proper civic vigilance.

How simple it was going to be, to make the ruling Sengpa sept pay dearly for their cruel treatment of the Dardarbji.

The terrorist had been traveling for six wearisome days, his train stopping for new passengers, it seemed, at every other collection of four hovels or more, across three thousand miles of heterogeneous terrain: from Dardarbji itself, the small northern mountain-nestled city named for its majority sept, down alpine slopes studded with summer flowers, over trestles threading the foothill swamps of Swatay, across the endless village-dotted plains of Neethune, detouring most circumspectly around the jungles of Kubota, hugging the shore of the Verminous Sea for the last hundred miles, train tracks slicing through acres and acres of squalid slums, until finally, blessed and wicked Riarnanth rose up against a backdrop of towering cliffs, occupying the long, long, miles-wide strip of land between the Dallut Escarpment and the pleasant jade waters of Bangma Bay.

At random intervals along the curving cliffs, the terrorist noted as his chuffing train made its slow, populace-clogged way to the station, dozens of sizable waterfalls plunged over, their atomized mists casting perpetual rainbows. Captured at the bottom in big marble-ledged artificial ponds surrounded by tiled plazas, the resulting rivers rushed to the bay through an assortment of canals: the Meritful, the Easeful, the Tranquil, the Imponderable, the Torpid and others, trafficked by boats and bathers alike.

At last, inside the Battidarmala terminal, the tedious first stage of the terrorist's journey had come to an end.

And excruciatingly tedious it had been. Most of the trip had been spent standing, packed pelvis-to-buttock with seething humanity. Sleep was accomplished in shifts in special windowless cars, segregated by sex and outfitted with hard coffin-like niches from floor to roof, amidst suffocating odors of flatulence and sweat. Meals were catch-as-catch-can, based on whatever prepared foodstuffs vendors were selling as they raced alongside the slowing train. Voiding of bowels and bladders

occurred in public while hanging from a kind of bosun's-chair lofted outward from the train, while the train was still in motion. (Fatalities were common.) Facilities for ablutions were non-existent.

Yet his voyage could not have been otherwise. The group of radicals subsidizing his journey to Riarnanth could have easily afforded him private transport, for the terrorists counted among their number many of the most prominent citizens of Dardarbji. But the terrorist's camouflage relied on merging with the masses.

So now, as the terrorist paused a moment beneath the vivid aestival sunlight pouring down through the terminal's glass roof, he relished a moment of stoppage, of assessment of his condition in a small bubble of privacy.

His dhoti, crisp and white at the outset in Dardarbji, was grimed and splattered, and the strap of one sandal had broken when someone trod on his heel as he sought to advance. That sandal flopped loosely with every step, constant impediment. His single-knotted fabric bindle crossed an otherwise bare mahogany chest and back tacky with a crust composed of road grit and sweat, as if he were a breaded lamb chop. His hair was snarled, his teeth and tongue furred, and his nails caulked. He knew he was not thinking as clearly as he needed to, thanks to the general sleeplessness of the past week. He was hungry and irritable and lonely, for this was the farthest he had ever traveled from Dardarbji in his young life. The weight of his mission camped heavily on his shoulders.

And these pilgrims! How their devotions sickened him!

Passing by, two of them now grinned in an overflow of fellow-feeling and made Chuzdt's sign toward the terrorist: both arms bent at the elbow and held vertically close to the torso, with forward- and downward-pointing hands drooping as if their wrists were broken.

The locust's stance.

Worship of earthy Chuzdt was widespread across all districts of the multifarious nation, but not among the pure Dardarbji, who instead paid tribute to lordly and regal Jaggenuth.

But now of course the terrorist was forced by expediency to smile back and imitate the shibboleth until the pilgrims passed.

Best to get out of this hot, enclosed, pilgrim-filled space, he thought.

Although the streets of Riarnanth would be nearly as hot, nearly as tight, and certainly as thronged with pilgrims. But an odd breeze, a chance open vista, and a smattering of non-pious citizens would be a relief.

The terrorist passed the train's massive engine where it rested its nose against a padded wooden bumper. Workers were shoveling biomass into its maw and bleeding off wastes through unclamped nipples. The ketonic odor assailed the terrorist's nostrils, and he hurried toward the exit.

He had an address: Number 50 Djudrum Lane, in the Tsongtrik banlieue. There he would receive his next instructions. (The exact nature of his righteous assault on the city remained unknown to him, a precaution against unlikely capture and interrogation.)

But surely he could delay the rendezvous with his co-conspirators long enough to visit a public bath, a rice- or noodle- or samosa-shop, and a cobbler. Perhaps he would even grab a night's doss without company or obligations, just to rest up for his arduous and dangerous assignment, whatever it might be.

Thoughts of a woman hired to share his pallet briefly flashed across his imagination, but he sternly put them down. Duty brooked no carnal pleasures.

The exit to the terminal was festooned with long garlands of garish flowers, both real and paper. A banner in the harsh Sengpa script, which all the children of Dardarbji had been forced to learn for the past hundred years, welcomed the "brides and grooms of Chuzdt."

Outside fresh breezes from Bangma Bay to the east enlivened the terrorist's sensibilities somewhat, although odors from street mire, cooking foods, beasts of burden, perfumes, pets, industrial processes and the bodies of approximately a thousand active citizens crammed into the proximate square block defeated nature soundly.

In Dardarbji's steep and solemn pristine streets it was not thus.

Tentatively the terrorist joined the flow of humanity. He was uncertain of the actual path to Number 50 Djudrum Lane in the Tsongtrik banlieue. But he assumed he would soon discover a public information cubicle where he could ask for directions.

He noted from an official enameled sign affixed to the wall of a build-

ing that he had left behind Khunds Road and now traversed Jonkul Avenue.

A block ahead, a knot of people surrounded a small raised stage, atop which a troupe of actors cavorted. Not quite approving but nonetheless intrigued, the terrorist stopped to watch.

The leader of the troupe sported a fierce mustache that trailed below his chin. Acerbic and wry, he seemed to include his listeners in on some droll secret. While beautiful women in pastel silks danced behind him and clowns juggled antique scimitars, he pitched to the crowd.

"Come see Hrangit's Accomplished Thespians and Mountebanks this evening, as we enliven your dull existences with a drama of deep tragedy and heroism. 'The Inundation of Riarnanth!' That most ancient legend of the destruction of your very own beautiful city, when the puissant sea turned traitor and smashed down upon the metropolis! Enacted before your unbelieving eyes with miraculous effects! Only those who could climb the Dallut cliffs like monkeys or swim in Bangma Bay like fish survived that day."

On cue a small monkey appeared from nowhere and clambered up the pants of the pitchman to perch atop his head. A clown attempted to help dislodge the beast by whacking it with a bladder shaped like a puffer fish. The crowd roared.

When at last the boisterous citizenry quieted down, the pitchman concluded: "I, Hrangit, guarantee your satisfaction!"

The terrorist found himself smiling and feeling beneficent. Mention of the destruction of Riarnanth constituted a good omen. He felt grateful to the troupe. If their gods favored them, Hrangit and Company would move safely on to another city before a more modern disaster befell Riarnanth.

Jonkul intersected with a broader boulevard denominated Poonma Way. The terrorist arbitrarily turned right, still seeking a public information cubicle of the kind he was familiar with from home.

A corps of musicians, all male youths in gold-braided uniforms, meandered down the street, barely avoiding collisions with vehicles such as a big dray full of pumpkins, while celebrating Chuzdt's temporary reign with sarod, flute, violin and tablas. People threw coins at

them for luck and out of appreciation. The bandleader, a wiry old man whose instrument was the vina – carried more for show than for use – hurriedly gathered the coins. "Chuzdt thanks you, and Doumani and his Golden Songboys do likewise!"

Growing thirsty, the terrorist stopped for a cool yogurt drink from a sidewalk cart surrounded by a scrim of water from its onboard melting ice blocks. As he was finishing it, a beggar approached. Dressed in tatters, his bare feet horned and cracked, his big frame warped, the man displayed various sores and scars.

"An oobol or two, good sir, to feed poor Goza! In Chuzdt's name!"

The beggar's lack of propriety, disgusting condition, and evident disfavor in the eyes of Jaggenuth repelled the visitor from Dardarbji. His clean city would never countenance the presence of such.

"Get away! I have no oobols to spare for you! Hire yourself out as guide to the fiery cracks of Mount Meru, for all I care!"

The beggar named Goza cringed obsequiously. "Blessings from Chuzdt be yours in any case, good sir!"

Gratefully leaving the beggar behind, the terrorist continued his search for a booth where he could get the directions he needed. Could it be that Riarnanth did not possess this public amenity?

In Dardarbji there was hardly a block that did not boast the little stupa-shielded hollow statue whereby one communicated questions and payment through capsules dropped down a demon's mouth and thence through a pneumatic system to a central library, and received speedy answers back – out the demon's nether parts! (Information as such was not a particularly revered commodity in Jaggenuth's eyes, spiritual fervor being favored.) But Dardarbji was a civilized, advanced place, and these people were all obviously uncultured heathens.

The terrorist came abreast of a large humming factory of pleasant aspect, set behind an iron fence: an immaculate, sprawling, sand-colored building of some three stories, its open windows affording fine ventilation to its workers, the whole complex, including a plashing fountain, shaded by tall pipal trees.

After a second, the terrorist recognized the sound of scores of sewing machines, powered no doubt by a stomach in the basement. His trained

eye soon discovered the fart-pipe venting that stomach's exhaust, as well as a chute for biomass deliveries. It was well to pay attention to the details of the enemy's infrastructure.

A plaque on the factory read:

VALVAY'S GARIAL HIDES
FINEST QUALITY
12000 POONMA WAY

In one window on an upper floor, just a few yards from the street, a self-important-looking man could be seen sitting at a desk, shuffling papers and string-bound folders. A beautiful woman entered the office and addressed the man, and he replied. But their words were lost amidst the factory hum.

Possibly, thought the terrorist, that man was the proud owner Valvay himself, one of the class of commercial exploiters who had so oppressed Dardarbji. What would it be like, to command flocks of people – including such a splendid woman?

As the terrorist passed the building, a piercing whistle blew. Workers, mostly other young women, began to pour out the doors. End of shift already! The afternoon was well advanced. The terrorist could feel his hours of hypothetical leisure slipping away. He determined to forget about seeking directions to his rendezvous until tomorrow, and concentrate on finding lodgings, a bath and food.

But now a few hundred yards further on, Poonma Way was all industry, with no signs of what he needed. Reluctant to backtrack – he was constitutionally averse to ever overturning his own decisions or retreating, a trait which had worked in his favor during the tough competition to carry out this mission – the terrorist instead looked for a cross-street that would bring him to livelier commercial precincts.

Ahead, a dim alley loomed between big windowless warehouses. The terrorist hesitated at its mouth. Light and almost abstract colorful motion at its distant far end betokened another avenue. No other obvious route toward what he sought offered itself.

He ventured down the dimly lit narrow passage.

A heap of noisome rubbish halfway down the alley urged the terrorist over toward the far wall.

As he sought to navigate past the midden, three four-legged shadows arose from the pile.

The terrorist's heart skipped –

But they were just dogs – middling yellow-furred mutts. Wild dogs, yes, but surely no real threat –

And then he saw the salps.

Clinging to the fur of each dog at the base of its upper neck was a gelatinous translucent blob, inside of which an embryonic entity could be vaguely seen. The terrorist had been warned in his briefings of such amphibian threats, to be encountered in some of the city's canals less well tended by cleaning squads.

Its nervous system intertwined with that of the dogs, the parasitic salps were the true predators, sentient and merciless.

The lead dog growled puppet words: "Man, lie down and feed us."

"No!"

The terrorist lashed out with an expert kick, but the salp-driven dogs were even wilier than their feral natures normally allowed. They ringed him just out of reach, then began to close in.

The terrorist leaped high over one dog, landed, stumbled, and felt teeth graze his calf. Then he was up and running, back the way he had come.

He almost made it to the alley mouth. But then his broken sandal sent him sprawling.

The dogs were on him, snarling, slavering. He writhed, sought to protect his neck, stomach, groin all at once –

"Make him quiet!" one dog ordered.

Another dog gripped a blunt heavy stick in its mouth. The mutt swung, and the stick connected with the terrorist's head.

Hrangit climbed down off the portable stage as the crowd dispersed. "Break this down," he ordered. "We have to be set up in Sringla's Yards by eight tonight!"

His troupe swung into efficient action as he watched with approval, stroking his mustache. All was going well in this early period of their

long engagement during the Festival of Chuzdt. Riarnanth was always a rewarding venue.

So why then did he feel so uneasy, as if some vague doom loomed just around the corner? He had been happy and cheerful until a few moments ago. Some indefinable aura from the most recent crowd, a malign presence?

Hrangit resolved to pay a visit to the shrine of his sept's god, Yeshe. Surely he would get answers from her....

Doumani hoisted his vina aloft like a baton. His lads looked so splendid, he could hardly decide which to bed tonight.

"Now, boys, 'The Potter's Lament'! And don't let it lag! Practice is the key! We have to sound good if we're playing at the Factors' Dance tonight!"

Goza left the yogurt vendor behind, and headed straight for the nearest constabulary headquarters, at the corner of Preem and Lall. The farther he got from his usual haunts, the more his appearance changed. His burly limbs seemed to unkink, his manner became less deferential. On the steps of the official building he began peeling fake scars and sores from his body, throwing the rubber prosthetics into the street.

By the time he approached the front desk where a fat uniformed constable sat reading a cheap pulpish magazine, Goza the beggar showed forth as a virile fellow, all self-assurance and wit.

"Chalch! Listen up! It may be nothing, but I just encountered the most unlikely pilgrim. He swore at me using a Dardarbji epithet. What would one of his kind be doing here for Festival?"

Valvay sipped at a fresh cup of tea, his tenth that day, and fingered a sample garial hide from the latest lot. Exquisite, supple, beautifully patterned. This would make some rich woman a fine pair of shoes or handbag or belt. And enrich Valvay considerably in the process.

All was right with the world.

The door to Valvay's office opened, and Safiya looked in. Her short

black hair framed an intelligent face the shade of Valvay's tea.

"Any last task, sir? I'll be going shortly."

Valvay waved his assistant on her way. "No, no, I wouldn't keep you on the first night of the Festival. Go, and have a good time."

The familiar whistle sounded just then, signaling the end of the shift.

Safiya said, "Thank you, sir. You enjoy yourself as well. I understand the Factors' Dance will be extra-special tonight."

"Yes, Septon Anjai Mace is the sponsor this year. He beat out Septon Majin Panaranja in the Trials of a Thousand Delicacies. I understand there were some hard feelings, but I anticipate nothing but jollity."

"I am happy for you and the other Factors."

As she turned to leave, Valvay said, "Do you have that protection I gave you? You persist in living in that horrible neighborhood, even though I've offered to find you better lodgings."

"I can't leave my parents, sir, and they absolutely refuse to move."

"Oh, all right. But the offer stands!"

Safiya closed the door.

Valvay sighed, and wondered if he'd ever manage to seduce the girl.

Safiya walked down Poonma Way, at ease with her thoughts. Valvay was so transparent. He was only after one thing. Maybe she should give in. But he was married, and so much older –

Ah, well, she needn't decide now!

She considered how she'd spend her evening. She had to shop for supper first, for her parents, Ratna and Karst, and herself. Cook and serve it, of course. Chat with her folks. Then there were a few accounts she hadn't finished, and which she had taken home. She patted her big garial shoulder bag – one of the poor-quality castoffs, sold cheap to employees – to feel the sheaf of papers within. But after all that, she'd be free to go out and celebrate with her friends.

Growling noises broke into her imaginings.

Dogs! A familiar nuisance.

Safiya took down her bag and thrust a hand within.

There, in the alley mouth –

Three salp-ridden curs, working at a victim!

The boom from Safiya's pistol echoed like a thunderclap. Manfully, she worked the chambers to line up another round with the firing pin.

But the dogs were already gone running. If she had even hit one, it hadn't hindered them.

Safiya bent over the unconscious bloody man. Some poor pilgrim. What to do? She couldn't just leave him. But no one else was about. Get him out of the alley anyhow....

She reached down, gripped him under his arms, and pulled him out to the street.

This was really going to put a crimp in her evening.

VIEW 2

Cornflowers Beside the Unuttered | CAT RAMBO

AT THE END OF the longest summer days, the light stretches thin as lace until it breaks to release the blue shadows swelling insistently beneath it. Along the many-named canals, swallows and bats flicker and flutter over the turgid waters.

A madwoman swayed at the tiled edge of the Canal of the Unuttered, a string plucked by indifferent glances. Her gown was smeared with rust and black oil, and a mysterious scattering of blue cornflowers, wilting, heat-crumpled, lay around her filthy toes.

Her shadow pooled like liquid on the hot pavement and wrinkled in the cracks. Ants crawled from it like bits of darkness, going about the evening's business. The salps watched her from the safety of the alley's mouth, measuring the rates of the passersby, calculating the angle to grab a wrist or ankle. They spoke in guttural whispers, words shaped to the needs of their mouths, the cartilage whistle and squeak and thrum. She smelled of heat and cheese, iron and vinegar, a smell that called to the dog bodies and lured them forward, nipping and jostling at each other. One whined, a high-pitched need in the gathering shadows, but the woman did not turn even as they scuffled and slunk their way back, an erratic pendulum swinging closer, closer.

She did turn at the sound of whistling, a lethargic melody that only the whistler would have recognized as "Riarnanth's Dirge."

Hrangit barely saw her through the shadows. His mind was automatically cycling through the song, lips shaping the notes of their own volition, giving himself time to think, to puzzle out the source of the pall lying over him. At the intersection, the only light between the high buildings was provided by a battered crank lantern that no one had turned recently. Wishing he had a knife or gun, he reached out and swung the handle halfway through its arc as he passed. It shuddered brighter, just enough for him to glimpse the form, like a puppet dangling on invisible cords, on the edge of the canal.

"Here now!" He grabbed an elbow and found it unpleasantly pliant, almost rubbery as she swayed back toward him. At the contact, the gloom that had been pursuing him clenched hard and fast as an unexpected blow, so like a vise that he thought "Better hire an exorcist," thinking for a moment that he had been ambushed by one of the little doom-ghosts that haunt the canals at night, the suicide wraiths who usually lie like moonlight on the water and only ensnare those who look directly at them.

He heard yelps and whispers behind him, a forward scuffle that made him pull her sideways, into the brighter light of the lantern and let go, letting her spill, cornflower petals drifting from her hands while he grabbed the crank and spun it with a panicked, ratcheting whir so fierce he expected sparks to fly out from the gears. It came apart and bits of metal flew across the ground with a clash and jingle, others plinking one by one in crescendoing arcs, in the turgid canal water, never to be seen again.

The salps conferred in their alleyway, whining and peeing against the cool bricks as they talked. One, mouthing his stick, was silent, eyes and ears attention-twitched back and forth between the words of the others.

It had been the smell, the elusive, alluring smell of her. Dropping his stick beside the oily bricks, the silent one licked up the blue petals

beside the canal and came back with them clinging to his whiskers, brilliant against the dirty fur.

They were confused, and in the globes where the parasites swam, they stirred and coiled and the salty fluid around them tasted of steel and confusion. One became so overloaded by conflicting signals that the dog body flopped to the ground and convulsed in the dust, spasming back and forth while the others whined sympathetically. Finally the fit passed and the salp spun in its chamber, bruised but relieved to find the membrane surrounding it intact.

They pushed forward, following Hrangit as he shed cogs and gears in his frenzy to tug the madwoman away toward a broader, better-lit avenue, where the crowds resumed. The salps curled close to the shaggy necks – as long as the dogs did not move too purposely, there was a good chance they would not be noticed, and any pursuit would be slow and two-footed.

All he had wanted was to visit Yeshe, to go into the courtyard that always seemed quieter than it should be, and to sit in the shadow of the god, half spider, half elephant, half something else. The statue had been carved decades ago, maybe as long as a century. His father claimed to have figured out whether or not he wanted to marry (the answer was no) while sitting there, and his great-uncle claimed that while he was sitting there, the god had spoken to him – "Quite a long conversation, and so pleasant spoken, you would have thought him an old friend." The old man had been given to speaking to the god in his later years, and Hrangit remembered being lectured, the rheumy eyes fixed on a point just beyond his shoulder with a terrifying fixity that had given him the constant urge to spin and confront whatever ectoplasmic wonder the senior was witnessing. But the few glances he had stolen had revealed only air transfixed by the pinpoint glare, and in time he had come to think of the habit with false nostalgic fondness, forgetting the stomach-twitching anxiety the old man's stare had always induced in him.

It had always seemed conceivable to him that the god might choose to talk to him in turn, and that he would be a far better conversationalist than any other member of his family. Indeed, he had saved away two

or three very funny but tasteful jokes and several anecdotes of the sort he thought that a female god might enjoy, steering away from the topics of politics and the divinity of rulers and toward the absurdity of toads and clouds. Every time he had sat beside Yeshe, he had felt the silence seep down into his very bones and then assume a waiting patience, as though this, this might be the day in which the god would at long last open her eyes and greet Hrangit in tones mild but familiar.

With a sigh, he let go of this pleasant dream and let his mental vision of the god sink back into silence as he and the madwoman emerged into the louder drub and hum of the crowded street. Street children, dusty hair and big eyes, were grouped around a dhosa cart, begging for scraps from the vendor, who did his best to ignore them while fulfilling the orders of the paying members of the crowd. From far away the crackle and pop of a string of firecrackers overcame the oil sizzle and clink of coins, even though the sun had yet to set, and the pleasant, savory wind became tainted with sulfur and gunpowder.

The crowds were frenzied, an eddy from one place to another, a factory shift changing perhaps or a performance of some sort letting out, maybe a gathering going somewhere, where, he couldn't tell, but he kept his hold on the madwoman's sleeve as the crowd pulled him along, washed him through the street like a paper boat on a stream. He thought he heard her saying? singing? something, but when he shouted and gestured incomprehension with his free hand, she gave him a sweet, bewildered smile. He noticed her eyes were as blue as a midday sky, the blue of answered prayers and sunsets in fairy tales just as an enormous woman in a yellow sari jostled past, features working with emotion, and severed the grasp of their hands.

He pushed his way after her, swimming through the crowd with awkward flailing motions that may have slowed more than sped him along. He saw her over the crowd, then through a gap between two white-robed men, then glimpsed her pushed in the direction of the central fountain. He followed up the twelve worn steps, running, half-falling, not sure why he was so terrified at the thought of losing her.

He reached her at the peak of the stairs where she stood beside a balloon vendor. She fell back into his arms laughing, a deep guttural laugh-

ter as her body fell apart into thousands of brilliant blue petals, a drift of color that danced on the breeze like a dust devil long enough for him to gasp. The balloon vendor said something intelligible and let go of the strings, letting the red balloons soar upward, faster than birds. The air went still and the petals fell, carpeting the stone in a bright, slippery flood that made him stumble and go to one knee, the vendor clutching at his shoulder for support while the unnoticing crowds continued their dizzy swirl and the balloons fell into the darkening sky.

VIEW 3

All God's Chillun Got Wings | SARAH MONETTE

JIN DOES NOT REMEMBER a time before she was Jin.

She knows that there must have been such a time, for no salp would be wasteful enough to attach itself to a puppy, and salps themselves have a complicated life-cycle, in only one phase of which do they require symbionts. So there was a dog, and there was a salp, and they were not always one.

But now there is Jin.

Barring disease or disaster, a salp's host will live as long as the salp remains in its symbiont phase. What happens after that, Jin doesn't know. She's seen the transformation, the salp fighting its way free of its protective sac, all claws and teeth and wet-glistening membranous wings; she's seen the new creature – called a salp no longer, but instead a dhajarah – launch itself, screaming, for the sky, and the dog, which a minute ago had been a friend, a fellow-soldier, collapse to the ground, a lifeless sack of bones and fur.

But no dhajarah has ever returned to talk to a salp. She doesn't know if her friend Mutlat, if her friend Ru, are still themselves as they hurl themselves across the sky or hang in their rookeries in the vaults of the cathedrals, the railway stations, the cavernous, reeking warehouses that bulk along the docks. She doesn't know if she will still be Jin.

Most of the time, she doesn't worry about it.

*

Goza the Beggar was a good fellow, but people didn't want to talk to him, no matter how many times he swore – truthfully! – that he wasn't contagious. So when he left headquarters, it wasn't as Goza the Beggar, but as Azog the Hoodlum.

People talked to Azog, whether they wanted to or not.

He worked his way through the less desirable quarters of the city, following the line of the railroad, cajoling, threatening, bribing, in a couple of instances resorting to violence, more to relieve his steadily growing frustration – and to stay in character – than anything else. No one seemed to know anything, although people were definitely nervous. Everyone was willing to tell him the omens their mother's best friend's son-in-law had seen, or the dream their sister's second husband's granddaughter had had. Discord among the gods. Yeshe's name came up a few times, Jaggenuth's over and over again, and that tied right back into that very peculiar pilgrim encountered next to a yogurt cart, a pilgrim in Riarnanth for a festival his people did not celebrate.

Jaggenuth's name, and anger, and barely whispered, the Factors' Dance. Something about the Factors' Dance, but no one knew what.

The third time he threatened to break someone's arm, it wasn't Azog at all. Not Azog the Hoodlum or Goza the Beggar or Enif the Constable or any of the other masks he slid between himself and the world like a shadow-show's colored screens. Just Nashira, who barely recognized himself in the mirror any longer.

Dseveh was performing at the Factors' Dance. Dseveh of the great dark doe's eyes and the wicked fox's smile. Dseveh with his voice like sunlight through raw honey. Dseveh who made all Nashira's charades and stratagems at once petty and worthwhile, worthwhile insofar as they could be used to keep Dseveh safe.

Dseveh who laughed at him for his romantic ideas – laughed, and then kissed him because no one in Dseveh's life had ever wanted to keep him safe before.

And for Dseveh, Nashira wrapped himself tightly in Azog and went down to the garbage dumps in the triangle between the Torpid Canal, the railroad, and Bangma Bay, where the salp-infested dogs denned and rutted and fought each other in the sweltering heat of midday. As infor-

mants went, the dogs were refreshingly, blessedly direct. If they knew something, they would say so. If they didn't, they would say so. And then probably try to eat him, but that was all right. He could handle it.

It was actually marginally safer to approach them on their own territory than to try to accost one in an alley. The latter tactic would get you eaten first; the former made you intriguing.

Azog had come to the dumps – the Fester, they were called by those unfortunate enough to live nearby – often enough that the dogs recognized his scent. Jin was waiting for him when he crawled out of the culvert.

I'm on a first name basis with a salp and its host, Azog thought, shivered, and said, "Hello, Jin."

"Hello, two-legs," Jin said, tilting her head to watch him with her one working eye. "What do you want?"

Azog told her about the peculiar pilgrim, about the rumors and fears. About halfway through, Jin sat down, and Azog felt a sense of relief that told him how anxious he had been. When he had finished, and was looking at her with a head-cocked curiosity that mirrored her own, she told him first about an encounter between a dog-pack and a woman made of cornflowers – "Lini still isn't back in his right mind," she said with a snort – and then turned her head and yelled, "Pimyut!"

Another dog emerged like a magic trick from the nearest pile of garbage and limped over.

"Tell this two-legs about the other two-legs," said Jin. "Tell him about the smells."

"And about the bitch who shot me," Pimyut said, half growling.

"*Shot* you?" Azog said, sounding as appalled as he could, and Pimyut, gratified, showed him a long shallow graze along her left shoulder and told him about a man in an alley off Poonma Way near the garial factory, easy pickings, and then the bitch with the gun, and all the things the man had smelled of, at least half of them foreign.

"Give him the sandal," Jin said.

Pimyut whined.

"Can't eat it," Jin said.

"Goj says – "

Jin stood up, her lips drawing back from her teeth. "Give him the fucking sandal."

Pimyut rolled to display her belly; courteously, Azog looked away, and didn't look back until Pimyut had returned with a broken-strapped sandal which was incontrovertibly made in Dardarbji. It said so on the sole.

"Thank you," Azog said, bowing first to Jin, then to Pimyut. "I will make the usual arrangement with Ravay the butcher—"

Jin made a noise, a noise he'd never imagined a dog could make. He lurched back, and Pimyut lurched with him, both of them staring as Jin crumpled and the sac on her neck writhed and bulged and finally tore, and a glistening black shape launched itself, fierce as a poisoned arrow, at the sky.

They stared for a long time at the heap of fur and bones that had been Jin. Then Pimyut shook herself as if she'd just emerged from the water and said, "So, two-legs. Ravay the butcher?"

She screams it to the sky, to the gods who may or may not be listening.

She is still Jin.

VIEW 4

Locust-Mind | DANIEL ABRAHAM

ONCE, IN THE DAYS before he had dedicated his inner self to Chuzdt, Majin Panaranja had had many alternatives. He might marry, or again he might not. He might take the man living in the small rooms across the alley as a lover, or he might not. He might have become a policeman, joining one of the morality squads that would beat men caught in the company of unescorted women. He might have learned to sing or to read or to grow living things. He might have left wicked and blesséd Riarnanth and taken to distant, dust-paved roads. He might have lived in an alley and eked out his existence stealing gull eggs from the cliff face. He might have grown rich by selling slaves or gained spiritual merit by freeing them.

Once, in the days before he had dedicated his inner self to Chuzdt, Majin Panaranja had been a young man of infinite possibility and great promise. It was a burden he had been relieved, at the time, to set down.

Walking now through the close streets of the Tsongtrik banlieue, his mind was filled with the constant, wordless mantra that was the true name of Chuzdt and his mouth and eyes were set in a constant, beatific smile. He wore a grey robe large enough to cover the blisters where the locusts that made up his god had been inserted into his opened flesh. He did not wish to be recognized.

Unease touched him; it was a human concern, and a falling away from Chuzdt. He paused for a moment, closing his eyes, and practiced devouring the thought until he was once again pure. A woman cursed at him mildly for blocking her way. Majin smiled without feeling either bliss or dismay and returned to his path.

The door at Number 50 Djudrum Lane showed that some former inhabitant of the building had been dedicated to Yeshe. Six hundred and fifty-four spider-black eyes considered him as he stood before it. With Yeshe, always six hundred and fifty-four. He knew no reason for the number's significance. He waited until, with a sigh of resignation, the door swung open.

Within, the house smelled sour with neglect. The low rumble of its plumbing suggested some stray infection afflicted its works and had never been tended to. The light that flickered from the heavy iron lanterns was as blue and cold as the moon. Irshad stumbled into the room, his hands taking the broken-wrist pose of prayer. Majin imagined what it would be like to eat the man; skin lifting from flesh, flesh from bone. In his mind, he took the small, frail body apart, lifting each organ to his own mouth with the joy of a toddler exploring taste for the first time. Majin returned the prayerful pose.

"Septon," Irshad said. "Something has gone wrong. The Dardarbji tool never came. I didn't know what to do…"

Majin accepted the information, letting it fall into the constant clicking maelstrom of his consciousness, letting it be torn apart by the aspect of Chuzdt. Slowly it occurred to him that this eventuality would require a human mind with all of its faults and peculiar abilities. He looked

down and, with a sense of profound nausea, forced himself to think.

"Did he discover that we were in collusion with his masters in Dardarbji?" Majin asked.

"I don't know, Septon. He never came to accept his assignment."

Majin nodded. The plans for the Factors' Dance would have to be adjusted. He found himself annoyed that years of planning against his rival, the Septon Anjai Mace, could be derailed by so small a thing as a missing Dardarbji. His sense of clarity grew as he considered, a bubble rising through water.

Septon Mace might have discovered the plot and had the tool from Dardarbji disposed of or imprisoned. The Dardarbji might have discovered that he was a pawn sacrificed by his own masters in the exchange Majin had engineered. Or perhaps the poor, foreign fool had fallen prey to one of the thousand, thousand dangers of Riarnanth. He might even now be smoking mint poppy in the dens of the Salvationists or suffering vivisection at the hands of whatever band of black artists had most recently adopted this unsavory form of political protest. His mind traced the possibilities, weighed them, and made a decision.

"We will move ahead without him," Majin said. "It will be more difficult, but not impossible. I believe I have sufficiently mastered the techniques he would have taught us, all on my own, thanks to sharing the god-mind. So if the Dardarbji does arrive, kill him. If the Septon Mace does not arrive at the dance, we will stop the plan then. Not before."

"Yes, Septon," Irshad said, and scurried away again.

Majin stood silently, his fingertips caressing the lumps in his flesh, feeling the insect twitch and jump at being disturbed. As always, thinking as a man thinks had left his mind impure. Like shoots of spring grass, thoughts and memories pressed up into the light. The face of a girl he had loved once. The song his mother had crooned when lulling him down to sleep. A shrill regret that he had become a septon rather than study law or trade. A bone-deep, wordless sense of loss. The pale, greenish flesh pushed up into him, and its roots tickled at a buried anguish and rage that constantly threatened to undo his training. Majin ate each thought, clipping it back with chitin mandibles until it died again, and he was once more pure.

As he stepped down to the street, his beatific smile was unaffected by the missing Dardarbji tool, the violence planned against his enemy, his own danger. It was the nature of the locust god that Majin should devour his enemy or be devoured by him; either outcome would be a sacrament, and the difference between the two signified less than the empty-minded roar of dry, imaginary wings.

VIEW 5

Constable Chalch and the Ten Thousand Heroes | FELIX GILMAN

THE DETECTIVE'S CLOSING IN on the Terrorist. It's only a matter of time. A battle of wits that can have only one outcome. There will be a showdown at midnight on the bat-winged echoing roof of the Battidarmala station; or maybe at noon on the cliffs in the bright mists of the waterfalls so high above the city that only the bravest heroes or the iciest villains could even breathe the air, could even dare to open their eyes. There the Detective and the Terrorist will make their speeches, but you can skip ahead, turn the pages, you know where your sympathies lie and you've read it all before. Get to the dance of fists and knives those elegant men will perform for you. The Detective will collect another sacred wound. What will the Terrorist's last words be when he falls? What will they be this time?

The magazine is called *The Ten Thousand Heroes of Riarnanth*. Everyone knows the Detective and his magnificent monthly adventures. Constable Chalch turns another yellow fragrant page and the cheap ink stains his fingers.

Half an hour ago Constable Enif left the constabulary station, strode off into the streets, full of pluck and zeal and clever plans.

Chuzdt favors Enif tonight! Constable Chalch, less clever than Enif, but wiser, will not go out on the night of the Festival, when the streets are a-swarm. If he sits at his desk all the sights of the city will come to him. Pickpockets, poppy-fiends, brawlers, libelers, profaners, abusers of beasts, prostitutes without license, cheaters of measure, public defeca-

tors – Chalch will process their arrests. That's as much of the Festival as he cares to see, and more of its stinks than he cares to smell. If no one's looking he'll maybe take a bribe or two in lieu of whippings; Chalch must marry soon or his poor mother may weep her way into the madhouse, and a constable's wages are not generous.

Who'd go out on the night of the Festival? Not Chalch. The station is warm and sticky-sweet with incense, and well-warded against evil spirits. Chalch sits with his feet up on the desk and his sandals off. He opens a tin of jellied locusts and returns to his magazine.

Just now the Detective's entering a poppy bar, in the shadow of warehouses. A hush settles over the reeking crowded darkness. It always does, wherever he goes. Probably, Chalch imagines, the Detective must think the whole world's like that, silent, expectant – the same way rich men must think the world's friendly. In the Detective's world no words are ever spoken until he begins asking questions, bending back fingers, pulling out nails, gouging out eyes with his powerful thumbs; and then there is only ever one possible answer. What a pure and simple world he must live in!

The prose hints at debauchery as closely as the censors will permit. The illustration on the facing page shows the poppy bar as an inky filth of shadow and drugsmoke. Its male denizens are crudely sketched, twisted foreign-featured ghouls squirming like worms away from the streetlight framed in the open doorway. The women are fleshy and beautiful in a way that requires Chalch, who's marched more than a few sallow poppy-junkies in and out of their cells in his time, to suspend his disbelief. The Detective wears a long black robe, and he shaves his head before he goes down into the darkness, for purposes both sacred and hygienic; he has no other particular features. Chalch always imagines him looking rather like a sterner and older version of Enif, though no torture that even the Detective himself could devise could make him admit it.

When questioning women the Detective usually only yanks at their lustrous hair. Sometimes that excellent man simply fixes them with

his fierce eyes and tells them that they're whores for the city's enemies and the shame is enough to break them. In this month's story the latter suffices. He says *Remember the Inundation* and the woman confesses through gratifying sobs and the Detective's off racing against time to the Temple of Nartham.

The door to the constabulary station is always open, like an idiot's mouth. From the front desk Chalch can see the sandstone steps, and across the street the empty lantern-lit park. Music drifts in, and cooking smells, and sweat, and the report of firecrackers, disturbing Chalch's reading. A man comes in to complain that he was robbed of his balloons, his livelihood, by something that seemed at the time to be a miraculous floral Transfiguration, but that he's since decided must have somehow been a con of unusual sophistication. Every year they get worse! What's Chalch going to do about it?

Otherwise the evening is pleasingly quiet.

The Detective's a pious man. That's good. Chalch is too busy to have much time for gods but he likes holiness in his fiction. What god exactly the Detective favors is always left artfully vague, though many of Ten Thousand's artists like to draw locusts swarming in his shadows, and a dissident few used to like to pose him in the magisterial stance of Jaggenuth, Giving Judgment.

Nartham is no real god, but a kind of composite of all horrid foreign gods, of everything Riarnanth despises and fears. So He's dirty and lazy and idle, but He's full of fanatical intensity. He despises money and business but He's a cheat. He's a dry and dusty desert thing but He threatens the Flood Once More. He's been a mosquito, and a lion, sometimes She's female, sometimes It's a confusion, but this month He's male. This month His temple's hidden in a slaughterhouse and guarded by slithering bloody-jawed garials. *We have turned your proud city's wealth against you*, the priests say, because they're there to say things like that. The Detective kills two garials with knife and gun, and manhandles the priests at the altar. Surely the priests were expect-

ing him to. This sort of thing is pretty much Nartham's most sacred and inevitable ritual. This is what He's *for.* The Terrorist's hidden by Bangma Bay, they tell him. He holds a woman hostage this time.

The evening's eerily quiet. Call this a Festival? The park across from the station remains empty as a graveyard. If anything it's grown darker and less festive as the time's ticked by, as one by one the tree-lanterns appear to have dimmed or dropped like overripe fruit. It's almost a relief when Constable Hamoy brings in a troupe of thieving foreign jugglers to be shown, pleading and groveling, to the cells. By the time they're safely down for the night Chalch has forgotten his place in his magazine, so he goes back to the beginning, where the Detective, exemplary citizen, paragon of spiritual refinement, shows that he loves the city so well and so sensitively that he senses the danger to it from the tiniest of signs – that the shift-whistles are ten minutes late on Poonma Way, and yet there are no riots, which can only mean…

Busybody Constable Chirag from the constabulary on Toop Street comes up the steps. He's full of energy and nerves. He cradles a folder from which papers threaten to spill. Self-importantly he calls for an "exchange of information." He's been walking all over the city. People are uneasy. His folder's full of witness statements, anonymous tips, records of the import into Riarnanth of some unfamiliar engines and organs bred for unusual and highly specialized purposes. Something's afoot. Can't Chalch feel it? Chalch cannot. What has Chalch heard, at the station on the corner of Preem and Lall? Nothing.

"All right then, Chalch. All right. What's Constable Enif heard?"

"Nothing."

"Where's he gone?"

"Don't know."

They stare at each other; then, shrugging, Chirag goes off into the night.

Good! Go and play hero if you want, but do it on your own time. Chalch, putting his feet up, feels a warm glow of self-satisfaction. A small victory!

*

The Detective slips silently through the docks, down by the black water of the bay at midnight, his sandals…

Out of the corner of his eye, Chalch notices a piece of paper on the floor. Because he's duty-bound to keep his station neat, he sighs, folds his *Ten Thousand* away, and comes round the desk to pick it up.

It must have fallen from Chirag's folder. It's a wax-stamped ribbon-bound record of the delivery of – Chalch has no idea what the word is, it's one of the words the breeders of stomachs and other industrial organs use, *spore*-something – to a place in Tsongtrik banlieue, on Djudrum Lane, down by the Canal of Symmetries.

With great reluctance Chalch recognizes the address. Constable Enif was over in Tsongtrik poking around only last week. Chalch remembers it because Enif came back to the station and asked, cleverly: Why would a Septon of Chuzdt be seen visiting a little broken-down doss-house on Djudrum Lane? To which Chalch, wittily, had replied: Perhaps he was hungry?

Ah. Damn it. This leaves Chalch in a quandary. It's probably nothing important. It's almost certainly nothing. He'd send Constable Hamoy to go running after Chirag but Hamoy has temporarily absented himself, clever lad. It's surely nothing…

Sighing, he puts on his cap and sandals and steps out into the night, holding the piece of paper out as if by waving it he can entice Chirag back, and maybe save himself the walk.

No sign of Chirag outside; he must be halfway down Lall Street to the next station. The steps are bare, the street empty, the park across the street silent and dark. The thick leaves of the palm trees droop in the heat like Chalch's elderly aunts. The branches of the pipals hang heavily, too, and there are shapes in them, dozens of eyes that glint in the light of the remaining lanterns.

Ah. Well, there's *one* mystery solved. No wonder the park's been empty of Festival-goers all night: the trees in the park are full with monkeys. Monkeys balance on the branches in stiff threatening little regiments. Monkeys hang by their arms. Monkeys sit on the backs of other monkeys. All of them regard him with grave black eyes; their heads are round and white-tufted, luminous, owl-like, intense.

Salps! In the darkness, on the other side of the street, Chalch can't make out the salp-sacs knotted in the white fur, but he knows they're there; this is not natural behavior for monkeys.

One of the salp-ridden creatures unties another paper lantern and it flutters dimming and dying to the ground.

Chalch takes a step forward. The creatures appear to be watching him. They appear to be judging him. He feels like he's on stage, and he's forgotten his lines. He feels like he's back at his examinations, which did not go at all well last time.

"Well, what do you lot want?"

They don't answer. His face flushes.

"Get lost, will you?"

They don't move. Well, it's their city too, in a way.

Chalch decides enough is enough. They make his skin crawl. Walking that gauntlet of still black eyes is beyond the call of any man's duty. He screws up Chirag's stupid invoice and goes back inside, where it's well-lit and fragrant and cool.

So of course what's waiting for the Detective in Bangma Bay is a trap. It's a good one this month: locked in the belly of the ship by which the Terrorist came into the city, the Detective chokes on its acids and the miasma of half-digested seaweed and krill, and waits cross-legged to be consumed. Apart from the Terrorist, the ship is full of hungry foreign workers, cargo, tribute. It's usually a ship that brings the enemy; ships are frightening, the sea makes people remember the Inundation, when the city was once, unforgettably, unforgivably, really vulnerable, really wounded – what, is the Terrorist going to come in by train like an ordinary man?

At the last minute, as always, the Detective breaks free through the intervention of the gods. Yeshe, Opener of Ways, tells the iron door to cease obstructing that holy man and it becomes a curtain and swishes apologetically aside. The gods will always come to Riarnanth's aid; there is never any true danger. When Enif pokes fun at Chalch's reading habits, Chalch likes to point out the valuable moral lessons these stories teach.

Now the Detective draws his knife and goes out into his city to enact his city's vengeance once again, one more time. But Chalch has to step outside too, because a string of firecrackers goes off in a nearby street, then another, and another, bursting over and over with a persistent monotony that's irritating at first, then strange, then frankly disturbing. And when he's finished shouting *Stop That!* to no one in particular, and returned to his desk, some bastard's stolen his magazine!

The bloody salp-monkeys? Hamoy?

Never mind. He can wait 'til tomorrow to buy a new copy from the man at the stand on Preem. He knows how it ends, anyway; it ends happily.

Chalch sits at his desk, looking out into the murmuring warmth of the night, and without entertainment he quickly grows uneasy.

VIEW 6

Golden Lads All Must... | HAL DUNCAN

KERTEL PERFORMS HIS ABLUTIONS with a haste that counters thoroughness and a thoroughness that counters haste, praying to Chuzdt, the Locust God, to Yeshe, the Opener of Ways, to Nartham the Ever-Remade, to Hazrin and Pakzish, the Great Lovers, and even to the Dardarbji deity, Jaggenuth – as foolish as that is: Let my song be clean and pure as the fields you have scoured, Chuzdt; let my heart open fully and the song pour freely from it, Yeshe; let the notes skip in a dance of change, joy turned to sorrow, sorrow turned to joy, as flowing-formed, unbound, unbindable as you, Nartham; let it draw Doumani to me, Hazrin, as Pakzish is drawn to you, and, O, Pakzish, as in your heart you tremble for your lover's touch, so let Doumani tremble for my words; and even you, Jaggenuth, even you, if you must judge me, judge me good. Good enough to be a Golden Songboy.

Outside the garret window, the sun is lowering in the east, painting the pagoda roofs and domes and minarets of Riarnanth in a late-afternoon hue that is, to Kertel, the very colour of music, the gold of Doumani's Songboys – not the gaudy metal lustre of gilded statues and

gauche carriages of the high-born, but rather sunlight on sandstone, firelight on marble. It is the colour of the cliffs that tower over Riarnanth and of the city itself, radiant in that too-short time before the Path of Sunset – the bridge of molten light that stretches from the far horizon and the half-sunk sun, over the Verminous Sea and Bangma Bay, to the docks and shores of Riarnanth – shimmers and dissolves into the dark of night, and the Festival begins.

Then the citizens and celebrants alike will flood with the flickering torches and the rising shadows along the streets toward the Factors' Dance, pilgrims and populace gathering in an uncountable mass in the great park outside the palace walls, performers and power-mongers strutting down the lanterned path and through the gates, proud to be among the chosen few whether as entertainers or the entertained. One day, Kertel hopes to be among those chosen few – *prays*, more like.

There are only a few short hours now before afternoon turns to evening, and Kertel's heart beats quick, nerves jangle wild. In that thin slice of time between day and night – *Do you think we are not busy, boy?* Doumani said; *we have practice, preparations!* – he has his audition for the Golden Songboys.

"Then we shall see, my boy," Doumani had said, "if you can sing the soul alive, as any Golden Songboy must."

The Tranquil Plaza is something of a misnomer, thinks Doumani as he swings the windows open. The crash of water from the cataract that feeds the great pool, the cacophony from the scores of stalls that fill the plaza, and the din from all the taverns that look out upon the bustling centre nearly drown the sound of Jazuh, Hrenuzi and Parl trying to shout each other down next door. Which is saying something. Doumani strides across the room to thump the wall.

"Enough! Save those voices for the Factors' Dance tonight or I'll have you soothing your strained throats by gargling ghaznal oil!"

The bickering of the boys dies down, though it makes little impact on the clamour that fills the room. Even without the Festival, the Tranquil Plaza is far from… tranquil. Still, for a man of music there's a part of him that finds peace in the discord of it all, the vibrant, verminous chaos of

humanity. He saunters back to the window to take in the smell of dhosa and flowers, incense and sweat. There's a shuffle behind him, bare feet on wooden floorboards, then Ramazi is standing at his side, hand on his arm – Doumani glances round to smile at the boy. Naked but for his gold-braided tunic, slim hips cocked, with the flirtatious disregard of one who knows he is the favourite, Ramazi yawns and angles past him to peer out the window. He laughs and points.

"Look."

Outside, a balloon floats across a sky already darkening from cerulean to indigo; caught in vortices and updrafts, cross-winds and calms, it bobs and bounces, floats and falls, spins as it sails nearer to them. A few more are visible here and there, drifting on their own paths.

"The Factor won't be happy," says Doumani, "if those were meant for the opening ceremo – "

A shape darts from between two rooftops, black but glinting as if wet, a flap of wings, a flash of talons and teeth – a dhajarah. It shrieks, slices a sharp turn in the air, scythes through the sky to slash out – the balloon bursts – the boy jumps – and then the creature whirls up and away, all in an instant. A flutter of red rubber falls.

"Chuzdt," says Ramazi. He shivers. "Those things…"

Doumani ruffles the boy's hair.

"There's no real harm to them," he says. "It's the salps you have to worry about, my boy."

But he's not entirely unperturbed himself. The random viciousness of a bad-tempered cat, he thinks, the lashing spite of a boy wounded by life and bitter for it – some just can't help but strike out at whatever comes across their path. With a boy or cat, he knows, it's mostly a defence: don't come too close; don't try to touch me; I will hurt *you* before you hurt *me*. The dhajarah, like the salps from which they're born, though, are inscrutable in their aggression. They hunt for food and kill for territory, to defend their space, yes, but at times…at times their savagery is inexplicable – a flock hurtling down to gouge the eyes out of a statue; a pair of them flapping and scratching furiously at a tavern door; a solitary predator lashing out at a red balloon for no other reason, it seems, than that it's there.

He puts it from his mind with a kiss of Ramazi's cheek.

"What time is it, lad?" he says. "Your replacement should be here for his audition soon, I do believe."

"What do you mean, *replacement?"*

He grins at the scowl and pout, the folded arms. Raises his eyebrows in mock innocence.

"Well, you are a little more brazen than golden these days, Ramazi," he says. "And our would-be Songboy comes with the blessing of Dseveh himself. Voice of a sura-bird, he says. And what with you sounding more like a cliff-gull every day…well…I may have to let you go quite soon."

He manages to hold the solemn pretence for a whole few seconds before cracking and collapsing into laughter at the slap of the boy's hand on his arm.

Kertel eyes the narrow alley, knowing all too well the likelihood of lurking salps but knowing also that it's the quickest path to Poonma Way, the broad boulevard that runs from the Tsongtrik banlieue, through the mint-smell of poppy houses, then the fart-smell of garial factories, to the food-smell of dhosa and samosa stands…to the Tranquil Plaza where half the world, it seems each year, have their festival lodgings. Where the Golden Songboys have their festival lodgings.

He's still weighing up the danger of the shortcut against the time saved (and wasting time in the indecision, he curses himself) when a man steps out of the shadows, a rough hulk of a thug, hood shadowing his bearded visage, a tattered sandal in one hand. He seems to be studying the sandal at first, until a turn of his head casts a slant of light across a scarred eye and Kertel realises his gaze is actually trained past it, toward the ground – toward a trail of blood spots and red footprints that lead to –

He looks up at Kertel, and slides his other hand into a fold of cloak, reaching for a cosh or a knife, Kertel has no doubt. These alleys around the factories are as rife with hoodlums as with salps, and Kertel's mind is already spinning scenarios drawn from too many readings of *The Ten Thousand Heroes of Riarnanth*: an ambush gone wrong, the Detective staggering out of the alley, bleeding, while the villain's henchman comes

to on the ground, drags himself to his feet and sets out in pursuit; or a murderer surprised in the act by an innocent passerby who escaped with his life (but missing one sandal) only because the victim (a rich industrialist?) had to be finished off for the assassin to earn his pay (and now, of course, all witnesses would have to be hunted down and eliminated (unless they could stagger to the Detective's door to gargle a cryptic clue with their dying breath)); or – or –

"What are you doing here, boy?" growls the hoodlum.

But Kertel is already running.

He who is Goza, is Azog, is Nashira watches the boy flee, snorts with a gruff and casual amusement, in keeping with the hoodlum mask of Azog. For a moment, Nashira surfaces within him, in a flash of recognition and suspicion at Dseveh's protégé, the dhosa-stall boy…Kertel, wasn't it?…found song-whoring on the corner of Poonma Way and Khunds Road – Nashira, wait; listen – taken under Dseveh's wing for tutelage – the boy has talent – voice-trained in Dseveh's chambers, there when Nashira returns from a long day of hazily-described "work" – honestly, Nashira, you know there's only you, my… mystery.

He shakes Nashira from his head, rolls his shoulders, cricks his neck to bring himself back into the attitude of Azog, the sullen swagger. The boy is irrelevant, nothing to do with the trail of blood he's following, nothing to do with salps and strangers and broken sandals from Dardarbji.

"There's someone here to see you," mumbles Parl, "says he has an audition."

Doumani flourishes a hand.

"Send him up, then. Send him up. And fetch Hrenuzi; I'll need the two of you for the triptet."

A look of panic on the boy's face: "But *Jazuh's* our third. You're not thinking of – "

"It's just an audition," says Doumani. "Don't worry."

He shakes his head as Parl disappears from the door. Songboys can be such a high-strung sort, worse than racehorses. But really…for all

their squabbles and sulks, Jazuh, Hrenuzi and Parl are the tightest trio of the troupe, their voices so attuned, their timing so in synch, that you would think the three of them one being with a voice that sings in chords. Doumani's not about to break up that triptet.

"You want me to leave?" asks Ramazi, reaching for his clothes.

"Chuzdt, no," says Doumani. "I want you to stay there and look beautiful for young master Kertel."

A Golden Songboy, he thinks, must be able to sing no matter the distractions. In the palaces of septons, surrounded by dancers and jugglers, courtesans and catamites, it wouldn't do for a boy to lose his focus in a naive awe of naked wealth and naked flesh. Doumani's auditions always test for more than mere musical talent.

A tentative tap on the door.

"Come in! Come in!"

The boy is as pretty as Dseveh said, dark-haired and long-lashed, dark-skinned and long-legged. He's skittish as a colt, eyes darting this way and that, glancing at (and then studiously avoiding) Ramazi propped up on one elbow on the bed. Hrenuzi and Parl, in contrast, stand behind him looking decoratively bored. Doumani gestures for them to close the door.

"Speak," he says. "Let me hear your voice."

"I…I…don't know what to – what should I say?"

"Tell me why you want to be a Golden Songboy."

As the boy tumbles into a river of half-formed sentences, a rushing tale of his history and dreams, Doumani doesn't really listen to the words. He's not interested in a childhood on the streets, or imaginings of the exotic Outer Cities, or what it's like to be a poppy-boy in the Salvationist dens, or the first time he saw the Songboys at the Festival, or what a song-whore has to do to scrape by on Poonma Way, or how an assistant on a dhosa-stall comes to hate the smell of ghee (though he does find the scent of it on the lad strangely off-putting and enticing at the same time); no, what he's listening to is the timbre and the tone, the control of the flow, the time between breaths, the *quality* of the voice.

"Enough," he says, cutting off the boy in mid-flow. "You're a median voice, yes? You know 'The Elegy of Appurashnama?'"

The boy nods.

"Then we'll begin with that. Hrenuzi, Parl, on my mark…"

The two step forward to flank the boy, backs straightening into the singer's stance, chest out and shoulders back. The boy mirrors them in almost perfect time (*almost* perfect time) and together (almost *perfectly* together), the three breathe in and –

"Begin."

The Tranquil Plaza, as chaotic as it is, might just as well be silent to Kertel as he strides through it, oblivious to the hubbub, raptured in his own…excitement? No. Bliss? No. Tranquility? He almost laughs. He might as well be sailing over the market mire of vendors and visitants, afloat on an updraft of air, looking down from the heavens on the glorious, petty spectacle of a thousand celebrants and stall-owners, none of whom have any inkling as to why this boy, weaving his way across the plaza toward Poonma Way, is grinning so widely, walking so fast he's almost running and with such a spring in every step he might break into a child's skip any second. Thank Chuzdt! Thank Chuzdt and Yeshe and Nartham; thank Hazrin and Pakzish; and thank even Jaggenuth, even grim and surly Jaggenuth, because a Golden Songboy, as Doumani said to him, sings not for one god, but for all. And because he's now a Golden Songboy.

Or he will be, yes, he will be. An apprenticeship, Doumani had said, a trial period as understudy, stepping in if any median voice fell sick. Learning the ropes and learning the songs. And if one of the medians moves on, or Doumani finds a low voice to make up a new trio (there's a high voice understudy in the troupe already; they tried out with Parl as the low; so the audition just went on for *ages*), then, then, *if* he has improved enough, then, *if* the triptet forms right, if the voices fit, then Kertel will be, thank Chuzdt, a full member of the Golden Songboys, singing for padishahs and pilgrims, septons and supplicants. He's already singing in his soul.

He doesn't really see the children batting a limp red balloon between them as he brushes past, doesn't really hear the noise of firecrackers getting louder and more frequent as he breaks into a jog on Poonma

Way, doesn't really feel the thickening of the mob as he darts between them, dances to this side or that, angles and twirls to avoid collisions. All he cares about is getting home to gather the few belongings he'll take with him into his new life; he has to be back at Doumani's lodgings in half an hour, before the sun is fully set, before the Path of Light between Riarnanth and the horizon dissolves into darkness, before the Golden Songboys start their last parade of the day, from plaza to park and palace, there to serenade the revellers at the Factors' Dance.

"Be sharpish, boy. We'll not wait for you."

If he can make it back in time, he won't be singing, but he'll be marching with them, carrying a sarod.

"One more sweet face in the troupe never hurts. Think of this as the last part of the audition. A Golden Songboy has to have the strut. How proud can you walk, my boy, how pretty and proud?"

The wiry old bandleader's hand on his shoulder, on his neck. A glance at the half-naked youth on the bed.

Kertel holding Doumani's gaze, long lashes unblinking.

"I think you'll fit right in, my boy."

So Kertel reaches the corner of Poonma Way and Khunds Road rapt in his reverie of anticipation, with only the briefest glance down the wide tree-lined avenue, over the river of people pouring up now from the glass and iron edifice of Battidarmala, to the stark shadows of docklands beyond, to Bangma Bay and the sword of shimmering sunset. He's busy pushing his way through the streaming mob, weaving crosswise to the flow and cursing the crush of it, when the wave of light rips through his world, and everything is gold as sunset, red as blood, and burning.

VIEW 7

Forfend the Heavens' Rending | CONRAD WILLIAMS

WITH HER HANDS beneath the armpits of the wounded man she deemed unconscious, Safiya was completely unprepared for the victim of the salp-dog attack to speak.

"Where did you get that gun?"

His unexpected and perplexing words shocked her into dropping him and jumping back. He grunted at the impact with the paving stones, then recovered enough to climb shakily and slowly to his feet.

"Where did you get that gun?" he asked again, gesturing at the weapon whose butt protruded from Safiya's shoulder bag. His ankle was bleeding badly.

Why was he so concerned with weapons? Hardly the common reaction of an injured man....

"You were bitten," she said, her eyes wide. He didn't seem to care. Or perhaps he didn't know. He was not from Riarnanth. She knew about fabric and this man's simple dhoti, beneath the grime, was of a better cut than the city's usual parade of garments. And what was he thinking with these sandals? Nobody she knew wore sandals like that in the city. The streets were too rough, too thronged for straps like this. The man would be lame inside a day.

"I just need to clean it. It will be fine."

"But the salps..."

He sighed and closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose with fingers that were thin and long. She saw something of her father in him then, the deceptive power in hands that had always been used to turn pages in library books.

"My name is Safiya. What's yours?"

No response. She persevered.

"I can get salves from my workplace. We have many. There are a lot of minor injuries at the factory. And I might be able to find you some shoes while we're there."

He looked down at his feet. He seemed to come to some decision. His face relaxed. "That would be helpful. Thank you."

"I can dress your cuts, but I can't do anything for the toxin. You should see a healer. We have excellent marrow leeches in Riarnanth."

"I'm all right. I have immunity."

He gazed at her as she drew her breath sharply. He had underestimated the woman, whose familiarity now opened itself to him; she was the woman from the hide factory. He had seen this same expression on

her face as she stood across from the officious little man in the office.

Her hand moved to tighten around the pistol's grip, but she did not yet withdraw the gun fully. "Who are you?" she asked. He saw her making connections, putting things together that might or might not be true. "The Festival," she said. "What's happening?"

He pressed his lips together, as if reassuring himself that he would not answer, and then found himself opening up. He was late for Djudrum Lane. They would be going ahead without him now, his own death subcontracted to street vermin. He had come all this way just to turn into a clown, a sideshow for children to laugh at while the main festivities unfolded.

"I don't know yet," he said. "I had an appointment. I missed it. Events are out of my hands now."

"Where are you from?" She was growing more confident. She unlimbered the gun from its enclosure and poked him with the pistol's muzzle.

"It really doesn't matter anymore," he said. "You're talking to a dead man."

He turned his back on her and began shambling off in the direction of the terminal.

"Wait," she said, sheathing the gun. "Come with me."

Safiya had never, in all her time at the hide factory, been back to the building so late in the day. Valvay did not ask her to work late and no functions were held behind its doors after the tanners and seamstresses had downed tools. She wondered, as she bypassed security, whether Valvay would still be in his office, or had decided to go hunting for women in the fevered carnival streets. The temptation would surely be too great for him, she thought, with a smile. The books could wait when there was so much flesh caroming around the city.

She led the way through a great hall of stitching machines, pistons raised into the heights like steel elbows. She was used to the rich, animal smell, the ammoniac tang of the treatment baths, the brown stench of the tannery, but the man was suffering, trying to cover his mouth and nose with the strap of his bindle.

Kerao slid out of the shadows ahead, his slingshot draped loosely at his hips. An insouciant smile, the ever-present smolder of his resin crucible cupped in his fingers. The sharp hit of it reached her seconds later. It was a wonder that he could draw a bead on anything after breathing that for most of his shift. But the fruits of his labor were there to see. A stack of pale, hairless bodies: rind rats, attracted to the factory by the smell of wet membranes. Kerao was good at his job.

"Valvay's going to void bodkins if he finds out you're bringing lovers back to his factory."

"He won't find out," Safiya snapped. "And anyway, this is no more my lover than you are my future husband. He's hurt. He needs help."

Kerao lazily traced the shape of his weapon with a finger. He eyed the other man keenly. "What's your name?" he asked.

"I don't need to answer you."

Kerao spread his hands. "Of course not. I was being friendly. Cannot a man cheated of his time at the Festival take advantage of an unexpected visit? Eke out a little warmth from his fellow man?"

He followed, strolling, occasionally loading and emptying his slingshot with hands that knew the task so well they didn't need his eyes to guide them anymore.

They passed through to a room with a bench and a sink and a red chest. From the chest, Safiya pulled a small, lozenge-shaped disc. She pressed her patient into the seat and tenderly wiped the ugly, puffy wound with a wipe teased from a clear envelope. The man clenched his jaw. "Wait," Safiya said. She positioned the lozenge over the wound and gently shook it. Thin wafers, the color of wet cement, slid out on to the wound, concealing it. A second or two, a flare of intense light, and the smell of burned flesh. The man might have passed out had he known what was coming, but the heat was bearable. He shot Safiya a quizzical glance.

"There's an anesthetic in there. It's heat-sealed now. No threat of infection. I just hope it will heal okay."

There was a clean, soft moment of calm. Nobody talked. A veil came down. Safiya and the man shared a smile. Their first. Their last.

A sound, a soft pop in triplicate, audible over the dulled fizz of the crowd outside.

The wall next to Kerao sprouted a red branch; Kerao looked down at his chest and spread his hands, as if to say *How am I going to wash that out?* He crumpled, the breath grunting out of him as his body found new, awkward configurations on the way down.

Safiya thrust out her hand. The man took it. She risked a look behind her as she ran with him through a pair of wooden doors and down the stairs to the chaos of Poonma Way.

Men strolling through the bands of shadow in the sweatshop, reloading, their targets locked on retinas that would not refresh for any other image until they had been dispatched.

The terminal was a great, bronze slab, like a monumental piece of machinery built only for the purpose of processing people. It sucked them in and churned them through ticket barriers and security grilles. It forced them through the mangle of soup huts and noodle hammocks; tiers of families hawking poorly manufactured bracelets and charms; men or women or inbetweeners offering equally poor services in hastily erected tents along the platforms. Heat and smoke rose to the rafters in the enormous train shed where it condensed and returned to the ground as a bitter, tarry rain.

The man was looking around him nervously, sweating hard, the salp wound, though thermosealed, turning the skin of his leg the color of unripe calloon fruit.

Normally, this area, with its promise of departure, would inspire Safiya with excitement. She had always loved the noise and movement, the scorch of demon's-prick chilis in the air, the hiss and roar of food being cooked for impatient travelers. The haggling, the thick din of debate, the curiously attractive trilling of the sirens and horns on the great trains. Now all she saw was threat.

Beige meringues of filth quivered in the ditches by the roadside. Beggars with stumps pleaded for money or food or regenerative hormone gels. A herd of thuc, painted with slashes of brilliant paint, turned onto the main drag. Acrobats and jugglers fussed and fretted at the clawed feet of the beasts, dared to get close enough to pin banners and pennants on to their plated hides.

There was a sense of arrival. The Festival seemed to be spiraling into the centre of things, both in terms of location and time. There was a feeling of criticality. The smoke and the stir – the electricity of the moment – turned the twilight sky into something bewitching, palpable.

At that moment, a dark seam split the heavens.

Safiya looked up to see what resembled a smudged purple underscore on a pale grey page. The leading point of it slowed and smeared and grew. She was put in mind of a sleeping bird at its roost, unfurling great wings in the moments before flight. She had to turn away when the thing's head shifted to show her a flash of too many teeth crammed into a mouth that seemed ill-suited to contain them.

What she hoped were firecrackers began exploding throughout the square abutting Battidarmala station's grand entrance. The energy of the crowd changed. Movement became less sinuous, more arbitrary. People began screaming. Pockets of red mist burst into the sky and hung there in the heat. She was no longer able to keep track of the specter in the sky, or what its smoking eyes were trying to fasten on in the crowd.

"Keranjian mani? Irith cull viridim? Anji? Ordu?"

The words, anger-spiced, pealed from the howls of desperation like something exotic freed from a bottle of vapors. She knew this tongue, but had not heard it spoken on the streets of her city before. "Nobody would dare," she cried.

The man she had rescued was crouched, crabbing his way toward shelter. He was volleying back sentences of Dardarbji over the uncertain heads of the Festival-goers. It was not yet apparent where the danger was coming from. Only that it was coming.

"Huth ninia," he shrieked: *There was another.*

Then he turned to her. "Barafil tau! Get down!"

A great bronze ripple bent the aspect of the sky. She felt its heat reduce her hair to stubble as it passed overhead. It was spent almost immediately. When she was able to blink moisture back into her eyes, the man was gone and every tree along the Khunds Road was ablaze.

Recommended Reading

THE FOLLOWING LIST of "New Weird" novels and single-author story collections is by no means exhaustive and should be considered a "jumping off" point for readers interested in further exploration. This list includes some material that might be considered "stimuli" to the New Weird rather than New Weird itself. It does not include the small offshoot of what might be termed "space opera" New Weird represented by writers such as Alastair Reynolds and Iain M. Banks.

—THE EDITORS

BARKER, CLIVE

The Books of Blood (vols. 1–3) (1984)

BISHOP, K. J.

The Etched City (2003)

BRITTON, DAVID

Lord Horror (1990)

Motherfuckers: The Auschwitz of Oz (1996)

CALDER, RICHARD

Dead Girls (1992)

Dead Boys (1994)

Dead Things (1996)

Cythera (1998)

The Twist (1999)

Malignos (2000)

Impakto (2001)

CAMPBELL, ALAN

Scar Night (2006)

CISCO, MICHAEL

The Divinity Student (1999)
The Tyrant (2003)
The San Veneficio Canon (2004)
The Traitor (2007)

CONSTANTINE, STORM

Wraeththu (omnibus) (1993)

DI FILIPPO, PAUL

A Year in the Linear City (2002)

FORD, JEFFREY

The Physiognomy (1997)
Memoranda (1999)
The Beyond (2001)

GENTLE, MARY

Scholars and Soldiers (1989)
Rats and Gargoyles (1990)
The Architecture of Desire: A Secret History (1991)
Ash (2000)

GILMAN, FELIX

Thunderer (2008)

HARRISON, M. JOHN

The Pastel City (1971)
A Storm of Wings (1980)
In Viriconium (1982)
The Course of the Heart (1992)
Signs of Life (1996)
Things That Never Happen (2002)
Viriconium (omnibus) (2005)

INGS, SIMON

City of the Iron Fish (1994)

KOJA, KATHE

The Cipher (1991)
Bad Brains (1992)

Skin (1993)
Strange Angels (1994)
Kink (1996)

KROHN, LEENA

Tainaron (2004)

LAKE, JAY

Trial of Flowers (2006)
Madness of Flowers (2008)

MIÉVILLE, CHINA

Perdido Street Station (2000)
The Scar (2002)
The Tain (2002)
Iron Council (2004)

MOORCOCK, MICHAEL

The Stealer of Souls (1963)
The Final Programme (1969)
Gloriana (1978)
Byzantium Endures (1981)
The Laughter of Carthage (1984)
Mother London (1988)
Jerusalem Commands (1992)
The Vengeance of Rome (2006)

PEAKE, MERVYN

Titus Groan (1946)
Gormenghast (1950)
Titus Alone (1959)

ROYLE, NICHOLAS

Counterparts (1993)
The Matter of the Heart (1997)

SWAINSTON, STEPH

The Year of Our War (2004)
No Present Like Time (2005)
The Modern World (2007; published as *Dangerous Offspring* in the United States)

THOMAS, JEFFREY

Punktown (2000)

Deadstock (2007)

VANDERMEER, JEFF

Dradin, In Love (1996)

City of Saints & Madmen (2001)

Veniss Underground (2003)

City of Saints & Madmen (2003; expanded edition)

Secret Life (2004)

Shriek: An Afterword (2006)

The Situation (2008)

WILLIAMS, CONRAD

London Revenant (2004)

The Unblemished (2006)

Biographical Notes

DANIEL ABRAHAM has published over two dozen short stories, winning the International Horror Guild Award for one of them. His upcoming publications include a novel written in collaboration with George R. R. Martin and Gardner Dozois (*Hunter's Run*), a six-issue original comic book through the Dabel Brothers and Marvel Comics (*Wild Cards: Hard Call*), and the third and fourth novels of his Long Price Quartet (*An Autumn War* and *The Price of Spring*). He lives in New Mexico with his wife and daughter.

CLIVE BARKER began his career in the arts as a playwright and director but began writing horror short stories in his spare time. In 1984 they were published, in three volumes, as *The Books of Blood.* Propelled by a Stephen King jacket quotation which read "I have seen the future of horror and its name is Clive Barker," the books sold extremely well and launched an award-winning career as a novelist and film director.

K. J. BISHOP has written one novel, *The Etched City* (described in *Hoegbotton's Field Guide to the New Weird* as "a digressive, plotless book about nobodies who achieve nothing"), nominated for a World Fantasy Award in 2004, and a small number of short stories. While continuing to work on a second book, she has caught the blogging bug and is currently producing an online comic, *Ecchi no City*, which makes amends for the heteronormativity of the abovementioned novel. She lives in Bangkok.

MICHAEL CISCO is the author of *The Divinity Student*, *The Tyrant*, *The San Veneficio Canon*, and a contributor to *The Thackery T. Lambshead*

Pocket Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases, *Leviathan* 3 and 4, and *Album Zutique*. In 1999, his debut work received the International Horror Guild Award for best first novel. His nonfiction appears in reference books published by Chelsea House and the Gale Group. Awarded his Ph.D. in English literature in 2003 (New York University), he is currently preparing his first critical work, *Supernatural Embarrassment*, for publication.

PAUL DI FILIPPO, a Rhode Island native, has lived in the Lovecraftian stomping grounds of Providence for the past thirty-one years. His partner of that duration is Deborah Newton, and currently they play host to a cat named Penny Century and a chocolate cocker spaniel named – what else? – Brownie. He sold his first story in 1977, and well over one hundred since. His new novel, *Cosmocopia*, will appear in early 2008.

HAL DUNCAN was born in 1971 and lives in the West End of Glasgow. A long-standing member of the Glasgow SF Writers Circle, his first novel, *Vellum*, was nominated for the Crawford Award, the British Fantasy Society Award and the World Fantasy Award. The sequel, *Ink*, is available from Pan Macmillan in the UK and Del Rey in the US, while a novella is due out in November 2007 from MonkeyBrain Books.

BRIAN EVENSON is the Director of the Literary Arts Program at Brown University. He is the author of six books of fiction, most recently *The Wavering Knife* (which won the International Horror Guild Award for best story collection) and *The Brotherhood of Mutilation.* He has translated work by Christian Gailly, Jean Frémon and Jacques Jouet. He has received an O. Henry Prize as well as an NEA fellowship.

JEFFREY FORD's stories and novels have been nominated multiple times for the World Fantasy Award, the Hugo Award, the Nebula Award, the Theodore Sturgeon Award, the International Horror Guild Award, the Fountain Award, and the Edgar Allan Poe Award. He has been the recipient of three World Fantasy Awards, for his second novel *The Physiognomy,* the short story collection *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories,* and his short story "Creation."

FELIX GILMAN was born and raised in London. He currently lives in New York, where he works as a lawyer. His first novel, *Thunderer*, will be published by Bantam Spectra in early 2008.

M. JOHN HARRISON recently won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for his novel *Nova Swing*. Other books include *In Viriconium*, nominated for the Guardian Fiction Prize, *Climbers*, which won the Boardman Tasker Memorial Award, and *Light*, co-winner of the 2003 James Tiptree, Jr. Award. His short stories have appeared in many venues, including the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Independent*. Since 1991 he has reviewed fiction for *TLS*, the *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph*, and young adult fiction in the *New York Times*.

SIMON INGS was born with a gift for numbers called "synaesthesia," the ability to experience regular mathematical patterns as colors behind his eyes. Around the age of nineteen, his synaesthesia started to fade, and he began writing novels in an attempt to explore the loss. Ings has since taken up more direct ways of dealing with these ideas – he is currently working on the science book *The Eye: A Natural History* – but numbers continue to exert a strong pull on his fiction, as the title of his fantastically intricate twentieth-century historical epic *The Weight of Numbers* attests.

KATHE KOJA has written numerous novels for young people and for adults, including *Skin* and *The Cipher;* her most recent is *Kissing the Bee* (FSG/Foster). She lives in the Detroit area with her husband, artist Rick Lieder, and blogs at *koja.wordpress.com*.

LEENA KROHN is a Finnish author who has received several prizes, including the Finlandia Prize for literature in 1992. Her short novel *Tainaron: Mail from Another City* was nominated for a World Fantasy Award and International Horror Guild Award in 2005. Her books have been translated into English, Swedish, Estonian, Hungarian, Russian, Japanese, Latvian, French, and Norwegian.

JAY LAKE lives in Portland, Oregon, where he works on numerous writing and editing projects. Recent novels include *Trial of Flowers* from Night Shade Books and *Mainspring* from Tor Books, with sequels to both books due in 2008. Lake won the 2004 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and has been a multiple nominee for the Hugo and World Fantasy Awards. Jay can be reached through his blog at *jaylake.livejournal.com*.

MIKE LIBBY is a multi-disciplinary artist who makes sculptures,

models, collages, and drawings in a variety of media. For the past eight years, aside from developing his main body of work, Libby has maintained the side project of Insect Lab. In this widely acclaimed and extensive series, he adorns and integrates antique watch parts and electronic components with preserved insect specimens. Borrowing from both science fiction and science fact, these customized invertebrates present the confluences and contradictions between technology and nature, while providing visually rich results.

THOMAS LIGOTTI has published several books now considered classics of dark fantasy, including *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* and *Grimscribe.* His work appears regularly in horror and fantasy magazines. An interest in music led him to a collaboration with the musical group Current 93 to produce *In a Foreign Town, In a Foreign Land,* a book accompanied by a CD containing background sounds and music intended to accompany the reading.

DARJA MALCOLM-CLARKE holds Masters degrees in Folklore and in English and is a Ph.D. candidate in the latter at Indiana University. Her areas of study are post–World War II literature (especially that of the speculative persuasion), gender and embodiment in literature and culture, and feminist theory. Her paper entitled "Subversive Metropolis: The Grotesque Body in the Phantasmic Urban Landscape," which addresses works by New Weird writers, won the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts Graduate Student Award in 2006 and can be found in the Spring 2006 issue of *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. She attended Clarion West in 2004, and her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Clarkesworld Magazine*, the anthology *TEL: Stories*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Ideomancer*, and elsewhere. She is an articles editor for the online magazine *Strange Horizons*.

CHINA MIÉVILLE was born in London in 1972. When he was eighteen, he lived and taught English in Egypt, where he developed an interest in Arab culture and Middle Eastern politics. Miéville has a B.A. in social anthropology from Cambridge and a Masters with distinction from the London School of Economics. His novel *Perdido Street Station* won the Arthur C. Clarke Award and was nominated for a British Science Fiction Association Award. Subsequent novels *The Scar* and *Iron Council*

have been up for multiple awards. He lives in London, England.

SARAH MONETTE, having completed her Ph.D. in English literature, now lives and writes in a one-hundred-and-one-year-old house in the Upper Midwest. Her novels are published by Ace Books, and her short fiction has appeared in many places, including *Strange Horizons, Clarkesworld Magazine, Alchemy,* and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*. Visit her online at *www.sarahmonette.com*.

MICHAEL MOORCOCK is an iconic figure in literature, having written in perhaps every genre as well as producing such mainstream classics as *Mother London*. A multiple award-winner, he lives in Bastrop, Texas, with his wife Linda and several cats.

CAT RAMBO lives and writes in the Pacific Northwest with her charming spouse, Wayne. She is a graduate of both Clarion West and the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars. Among the places in which her work has appeared are *Fantasy Magazine, Strange Horizons*, *Asimov's SF*, and *Subterranean*. Cat Rambo is indeed her real name.

ALISTAIR RENNIE was born in the North of Scotland and now lives in Bologna, Italy, where he works as an assistant editor. Prior to moving abroad, he worked as a painter and decorator and a core hand in the North Sea oil industry before studying and teaching literature at the Universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh. He has published short fiction in *Electric Velocipede* and *Shadowed Realms* and non-fiction in the *Scottish Literary Journal* and Anna Tambour's *Virtuous Medlar Circle*. His forthcoming publications include short stories in *Electric Velocipede* and in the British anthology *Fabulous Whitby* (edited by Liz Williams and Sue Thomason). Among other things, Rennie is a keen musician and regular practitioner of outdoor activities and mountain sports, with a general interest in meteorology, wildlife, and folklore.

STEPH SWAINSTON is the author of three novels, *The Year of Our War*, *No Present Like Time*, and *The Modern World*, the source of the excerpt in this volume. She studied archaeology at Cambridge and then worked as an archaeologist for three years, gaining an M.Phil. from the University of Wales. She has also researched herbal medicine and discovered traditional medicinal plants new to science. Swainston is a past finalist for the John W. Campbell Award and the British Fantasy Award.

JEFFREY THOMAS has set a series of novels and short stories in the milieu of his story *Immolation*, which include the novels *Deadstock*, *Blue War, Health Agent*, and *Monstrocity*, plus the collections *Punktown*, *Punktown: Shades of Grey* and *Punktown: Third Eye*. In addition, Thomas's work has appeared in such anthologies as *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, *The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction*, *Leviathan* 3 and *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases*. Thomas lives with his wife Hong in Massachusetts.

CONRAD WILLIAMS was born in 1969 and has been a published writer since 1988. He has sold around eighty short stories to a diverse range of publications and anthologies. He is the author of three novels, *Head Injuries, London Revenant,* and *The Unblemished*; three novellas, *Nearly People, Game,* and *The Scalding Rooms*; and a collection of short stories, *Use Once Then Destroy*. He is a past recipient of the Littlewood Arc Prize and the British Fantasy Award. He lives in Manchester with his wife, the writer Rhonda Carrier, their sons, Ethan and Ripley, and a monster Maine Coon cat called Reddie.

Editors:

ANN VANDERMEER has been a publisher for over twenty years, running her award-winning Buzzcity Press. Currently, she serves as the fiction editor for *Weird Tales* magazine. She lives in Tallahassee, Florida, with co-editor Jeff VanderMeer.

JEFF VANDERMEER is a two-time winner of the World Fantasy Award and author of such books as *Veniss Underground, City of Saints & Madmen*, and *Shriek: An Afterword*. The VanderMeers are currently editing the anthologies *Best American Fantasy, Fast Ships/Black Sails, Steampunk, Last Drink Bird Head*, and *The Leonardo Variations*, a Clarion charity anthology, among others.